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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS BY MISS GRANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

GOTTEGLIOZ

MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

BY

MISS GRANT,

AUTHOR OF "VICTOR LESCAR," "THE SUN-MAID."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

CHAPTER I.

A Highland Meeting.

THE *Stirling Castle* came into Portalloch the next afternoon, with her flags all flying and with a band of music playing merrily on board. It was the Thursday of the Meeting, the day of the first great ball, and it was a bright, pleasant day. The fickle fortune of weather had favoured the festivities of the Highland city more than usual this year. The sun was glistening brightly upon the spires and houses of the town, as the steamboat glided up to the canal-side and the long towing-ropes were cast ashore. They had had a charming voyage and a merry party on board. The silvery birches upon the wooded banks had glistened with sparkling rain-drops as they had glided along; the sunshine had danced upon the froth and spray tossed up by the paddle-wheel; and the gulls had swooped round their mast-head throughout the whole

voyage, spreading their snowy wings against the dappled sky.

All the party from the Glen were in great spirits, for, besides their own agreeable society, they found many pleasant and distinguished personages on board. Nearly every lodge and house within thirty miles of the loch-side had sent its contribution to Captain Fraser's passengers to-day, and as the ladies sat together in their trim tweed costumes and plumed hats, enveloped in their many warm, coloured rugs and wrappers, they made gay and picturesque groups below the gangway on the little quarter-deck, and in snug corners among the luggage around the funnel.

Dear old Captain Fraser was in the height of his glory. This was one of the cheeriest days of his year, and as he went from group to group, with his handsome little terrier at his heels, he had a courteous speech to utter, an eager salute to make, to one and all of them; to say nothing of many an anecdote and reminiscence to draw attention and interest to each point of prominence in the passing view. Captain Fraser knew everybody, and everybody who knew the Highlands knew him.

They all landed at Portalloch. Omnibuses were

piled high with luggage; a fearful confusion of travellers and valets, and maids and porters, natives and foreigners, taking place immediately as the steamboat disgorged her freight; and Ewen and all the attendant satellites of our particular party had a rough time of it for a few minutes, while they struggled to separate their respective belongings from the luggage of the throng.

"I will walk, father," said Clare, as she saw the huge omnibus that had been engaged for them, filling rapidly with rugs and wrappers in the inside, and laden with a mound of luggage on the top.

"And so will I," said Verner.

"And I, too," said Charlie Keith.

"Will you?" exclaimed the laird. "Well, I don't know that I will not accompany you. Come, we will take the short cut, and I will be bound we will be at the hotel before the rest of them."

And away the four went, crossing the canal at the first lock, running down a sharp bit of hill, and then threading their way across the yellow stubble of the shaven corn-fields, between tall hedge-rows, and along the lane towards the town, which lay bathed in a glowing sunset on the banks of its rushing river.

They passed close by the entrance to the ground of the games, where long rows of carriages were awaiting their owners, where a curious motley crowd was clustering thick round the door, and whence thrilling strains reached them of the wild pibroch of Lochaber, which Cluanach's piper was performing proudly to a listening and admiring throng. But the laird would not hear of their going in.

"No, no," he said, when they proposed it. "Come along, my birdie, to the hotel; you have enough to do before five in the morning to-morrow. I am not going to let you begin with the games to-day."

So on they trudged across the river, up the sloping street, to the hotel.

A few hours later they were in the brilliant ballroom—Mrs. Raymond Paget resplendent in La Ferrière; Clare, trim and fresh as usual, in soft violet tulle; the laird in his Highland dress, and George eclipsing every one in diamond shirt-studs and snowy frills.

It was a capital good Meeting that year. The rooms were filled already when our party entered, and the gathering was very brilliant and characteristic.

The dancing had already begun. Down the length of the wide hall the first reel was just started as they entered, and they paused to watch it for a few minutes near the door.

Mrs. Raymond Paget exclaimed with astonishment; the Englishmen looked on with sparkling eyes and with much enjoyment and some little envy at the fun; for great fun it was for those who could manage to do it. The music which struck up in the gallery was stirring to a degree, and the enthusiasm and excitement of the dancers was most exhilarating and infectious, and it was a very pretty sight. The long room, filled from end to end with ladies in every diversity of charming toilet, with men in Highland dresses of every conceivable tartan and style—some uniforms from Highland regiments among them, their vivid scarlet lighting up the picture gaily at every point. The uniforms, the glitter of silver horns and dirk and braiding, the sparkle of Cairngorm, and the rich, mingled hues of the waving tartans, gave wonderful brilliancy to the scene, as they whirled round and round in the stirring reel of "Tulloch," and the vivid colours of the Highland dresses mingled with the rainbow tints of the ladies' floating robes.

Our party stood and watched, admiring and amused, together, for the long reel reached to the entrance, and it was impossible to proceed further into the ball-room while it was going on.

The laird stood smiling and bowing from side to side, for he knew every native of the country about him, and every one from far and near knew him. He stood smiling brightly upon all the "young world," who were whirling and dancing before him with such frantic enthusiasm, and in all the brilliant crowd there was no more noble form than his—as he stood in his Highland dress, very simple and unadorned, carrying his plumed bonnet in one hand; his grey head held high and proudly, although often bent in gracious recognition and salute. Clare had abandoned every other cavalier and admirer for the moment, and was leaning tenderly upon his arm. Marion was just behind them with the colonel, and the two Englishmen stood with Mrs. Raymond Paget a little on one side.

Long ago—or "long ago," as it seemed to her—Clare had come to her first ball in these well-known rooms; had made her *début* much earlier than she ought to have done, because her uncle would not go

again without her, and because it was the autumn before her father carried her first away. And she had entered the room then with her beloved uncle Lairdie, and been conducted round the great hall by him, and presented proudly as his niece, and one day heiress, to the assembled magnates of the North.

And, so, she always liked to come in with him, and stand through this first long reel, and hear his cheery remarks upon his friends and cronies as he saw them one by one among the crowd. And she would never dance this first dance with any one, for it belonged to her uncle, and with him she liked to go once round year by year (as she appeared again in the country), to be kindly greeted by many a friend, old enough to be of his early days, although well-known also as a friend of her youth to her. She liked to go round with him, and hear the hearty welcome reaching him from side to side; to feel that she herself was a Highlander as she partook with him of the genial cordiality of her Highland friends; and she felt always, as she passed from group to group and clung closely to his arm, that amid all the many changes and many wandering experiences of her present life, her chief pride and satisfaction lay in the

fact that she was Highland, in spite of everything, and belonged so much to him!

Her father claimed little part in the possession of her at these times, nor, indeed, having once shot his grouse for the season, did he think much more for the present on the fact of his Scotch descent.

It would "come in" again next August. The English covers and the southern yachting cruise were points of more primary importance as the month of September approached its close.

"Are you going to join in these barbarous performances?" said Verner, presently, in a low tone to Clare, having escaped from Mrs. Raymond Paget for a moment, and arrived at her side.

"Barbarous! Major Carr, don't forget yourself, if you do not want to quarrel with *me!*"

"I beg your pardon. Am I offending? I mean, do you not think a great deal of energy that might be well expended in a valse presently, is being wickedly wasted in this terrific reel?"

"Oh! you can valse anywhere," said Clare, contemptuously; "but you can only see a reel danced like that up here."

"Perhaps I might say *tant mieux*," he answered

lightly, "only I should fear to make you angry again."

"Yes; do not say it," she replied. "I never like, you know, Major Carr, to think that *my* friends do not care for Highland things."

"I think a great many things in the Highlands are very much to be cared for," he said; "but to reel dancing, Miss Erskine, I fancy one must be 'to the manner born.' Ah! I declare it is over now; will you dance the next valse with me?"

"Shall I?" she answered with suddenly brightened colour. "I wonder if my uncle will be tired of me by the time it begins. You know this ball is not the least like any other one to me. I never think much about the dancing, except just a reel now and then with some very old friend, but what I enjoy so much is just going round with him, you know, and seeing so many people I can remember since I was quite a child,—and then hearing them greet him so gladly, and to listen to him talking to them all."

"Yes, but will you not come and walk with me a little, and tell me something about everybody, for I feel like a bird fresh from another clime among all this brilliant plumage. It is the only occasion on

which I ever remember feeling thoroughly ashamed of my black coat."

"Oh, I think just a few make a variety," said Clare, laughing. "Ah, what a delicious valse that is they are beginning! Is it not?"

"Will you not come?—please do. I have said I am engaged to you, so do not punish me for my presumption by the very feminine revenge of saying 'no.' Do come, one turn."

And so, before she had scarcely realized or consented to it, he had taken calm possession of her, and in two minutes had carried her swiftly floating down the room; far out of reach of Mrs. Raymond Paget's observations, or of any disturbing interference from her.

The laird looked on with a bright, happy glance, following their course through the brilliant throng.

"She will never dance younger," he said laughingly to Marion, who slid into Clare's place by his side. "It is very pretty to see the birdie, Marion, is it not? floating round like a swan upon the loch, eh? It is worth coming, just to look on at her once in a way."

Marion was looking on also, but with less satisfaction in her eyes.

The Arnleighs had just joined the party, and with Lady Arnleigh she had exchanged an expressive glance as Verner Carr moved away, carrying Clare along with him, and Marion sighed as she walked on with her father towards the centre of the long room. Clare had disappeared from them for the present, at all events.

Lady Arnleigh turned to watch with amusement for a few minutes Mrs. Raymond Paget venting her irritation and jealousy of Clare and Verner, in most unmerited displays of temper towards good-natured Charlie Keith. He was requesting her to valse with him; and Mrs. Raymond, while she consented, was doing so with many fiery expletives, in abuse of the room, the crowd, the dust, the general unfitness of the Northern Assembly for the exhibition of Madame La Ferrière's gown.

"I shall get it torn to atoms, I know," she exclaimed, pathetically, as she dived into the dance, with much dejection, at length, abandoning herself languidly to the support and protection of Captain Keith's vigorous and encircling embrace.

Lady Arnleigh laughed a little cynically to herself, as she watched this couple glide away, and then she

turned to accept the arm which the gallant colonel was proffering with much *empressement* and politeness. With him she moved forward, following Marion and the old laird round the corners of the crowded ball-room, threading behind the dancers, until they reached the line of seats in the centre, against the wall. Here many friends of north and south were collected, and here sat the lady of the lord-lieutenant, with many other Highland persons of distinction, whose part it was to patronize and give their august countenance to the yearly balls. By these gracious hostesses of this county festivity, Lady Arnleigh and many other visitors coming from varied southern scenes, were made cordially welcome, and found each an appropriate place.

Here Marion sat down, and the laird and his brother lingered, laughing and talking pleasantly among their lady friends, through valse, and quadrille, and reel, and valse again, as they followed each other in swift succession; and the ball went on. And from where they lingered, Clare's light, graceful form could be seen passing from partner to partner; now threading the mazes of a strathspey, with some cheery-faced cousin in radiant cairngorms and tartan; now floating

round again in valse or galop, and very often with Verner Carr as her attendant or guide.

Often the laird laughed merrily aloud as he watched her footing it nimbly in the quick-step at the reel o' hoolichan, or whirling round in the intricate and most perplexing figure of this most exciting dance; and he greeted her with hearty praise and congratulation at her performances, as, at last, as the supper-hour drew nigh, she came back to him, hot and flushed, all sparkling with bright youth and happiness, after much valsing and quadrilling, and after many a hard-danced reel.

"Well done, Birdie," he said. "Have you had enough of it? I am glad to see all that French dancing I hear about in the winter, and all the London balls, have not driven the reel-steps from the toe-points yet. Eh! well done; you and Clanrannachan, in that last reel of Tulloch, made a famous pair."

She was standing opposite to him, answering with a gay, loving smile, his cheery words.

"You are tired out now, I suppose, and want some supper?"

"Not one single bit tired," exclaimed Clare. "And I am going to dance the long country dance, uncle

Lairdie, with Hector Ross. Do you know, we have not danced together since before he went to India, I do not know how many years ago."

"A great shame," murmured Verner, discontentedly, "to waste precious time and energy on such a performance. You had much better come and sit down, Miss Erskine. We had far better take the opportunity of having some supper—look, it is going to last twenty minutes. Do throw over the kilted gentleman, and come downstairs, instead, with me."

Clare looked round at him with a vivid blush on her cheek and a bright sparkle in her eyes.

"I should like it," she said, in a low tone, "much better, Major Carr. I should like to sit down and rest with you, although, indeed, I love the long country dance. But I cannot, indeed, I cannot throw over my cousin. I have not danced with him for such a long time, not since he went away, you know, when I was quite a child."

"Tell him you have given up bad old habits," said Verner, smiling at her in his persuasive way, "and that you perform that dance—I will use no descriptive adjective—that particular national dance no longer."

"Oh, I cannot," repeated Clare, in a distressed tone. "Indeed, indeed I cannot throw over so old a friend."

"I fancy new southern friends will always have to go to the wall with you, when old Scotch ones come in," said Verner, a little bitterly. "I half suspected that, Miss Erskine, long ago."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, in a hasty, deprecating tone. "Don't say that, Major Carr; why do you torment me? you know—Ah! what was I going to say? I think all our friends, old or new, should be able to form a pretty true estimate from me of the extent and depth of my friendships. I fear I am only too transparent in the revelations towards every one of what I feel; and you—I do not think you are really very jealous, Major Carr. I think you may survive, with great patience, my dancing with my cousin in the country dance to-night, if I promise to go to supper with you all the time they are dancing it up here to-morrow. Will that arrangement do?"

"To-morrow night—famous!" he exclaimed; "still better. And I will stay here, and watch you dancing it now."

The long country dance was, indeed, the central event of the evening. It was a grand sight, rivalling the kilted reel in national characteristics and enthusiasm. The rush from top to bottom of the long room was very wonderful to behold, as the music burst forth in a furious, quick, reel tune, and the first couple dashed frantically down the middle of the dance. One after another followed them, until Highlander and Lowlander, civilian and military, kilt and troues, gorgeous aerial dresses and gay waving tartans, were mingling frantically together—as they crossed hands, tore down and up the middle, turned round their neighbour's partners and set to their own; and then began all over and over again, while the horns and violins in the music gallery rose into wilder and wilder strains, and the bagpipes took up the tune, and carried it valiantly forward as the stringed instruments died away with exhaustion, and could play no more!

For twenty minutes the dancing continued with unabating energy and fun. Then Clare, with her ruddy-faced young partner, in dark green jacket and crimson kilt, appeared at the lower end, having come right down through every single couple from the further end of the long room. There was uncle Lairdie

standing, awaiting her, and Marion, with many cheery smiles but with determined and arrestive words.

"Come, that will do, my birdie," said her uncle. "Well done, Hector; you have not forgotten the old style of footing it in the country dance—well done! You have had a good turn, and now I am going to carry you off, Clare. Not one more dance to-night."

"Oh! uncle Lairdie—Marion—just one more."

"Not one," said her uncle, laughing. "Do not let us forget we have to-morrow night to go through, and the journey on Saturday."

"My dear child," said Marion, "you must really come."

Clare looked rapidly round.

Where was Verner Carr? He was sure to come forward and help her to beg for one other valse, if he were within reach. But he was not to be seen. His place against the centre pillar of the ball-room, where he had leant and watched her during the first part of the country dance, was deserted.

She could not see him; so, after pausing a moment and looking artfully round, she took her cousin's arm

again and said, "Very well, uncle Lairdie; I dare say you are quite right. I am ready to go."

Hector Ross led her downstairs, talking all the way to her as they went, thinking "what a nice style of girl, foreign travel and London life notwithstanding, his cousin Clare had turned out;" and he went on rattling out to her pleasant little reminiscences of their early days, of hill scrambles and river fishing and rowing enterprises at the old Glen; and Clare answered him brightly, though often scarcely hearing what he said. For the present had become more to her just then than any ancient reminiscence of the far past, and she was wondering where Verner Carr had gone —why he had deserted his post of observation during the country dance.

She caught a glimpse of him as they passed the supper-room. He was talking to Mrs. Raymond Paget. They were standing at a corner of the table near the open door. Verner had his back turned to the entrance, and he was leaning forward with one hand upon the table, looking down, apparently listening intently to what the lady said; and Mrs. Raymond, holding a champagne glass in her hand, was looking up at him with her dark, expressive eyes, full of some strong

and passionate sentiment. She was addressing him—surely, in some strange voice of appeal, of expostulation, or of reproach.

Clare started, and instantly paused a moment, as she passed the open door. Then, her cousin turning in surprise to her (as her hand, lying lightly upon his arm, seemed to wish to arrest him), she remembered herself, and stepped quickly forward again, as her uncle called to her that the carriage was there.

CHAPTER II.

The Second Day.

THE next day was Friday, about the best day of the whole week at that assembly at Portalloch—the best day at the games and the best ball, as it is generally considered, for people keep their prettiest dresses for production the second night. But in the morning it is dull enough; everybody makes a late appearance that day.

It was long past her usual lunch-time, and she had but just finished what stood for that repast and breakfast in one, when Clare found herself sauntering slowly across the suspension bridge, with Verner Carr by her side; walking both of them in procession with all their own party and many other friends besides, towards the ground where the games were held on the other side of the river from the town.

Verner Carr somehow took his place beside her with calm decision during these days, for the time was short now, and he had much to do in it. He snatched what moments and opportunities he could for the paci-

fication of Mrs. Raymond, and he left her with determined courage, to vent her jealousy and her temper as she pleased upon the devoted, but very indifferent, head of his friend, Captain Keith. He knew he was safe of one thing: Clare was going on the morrow, and not by the same route or train as Mrs. Raymond Paget. That lady had visits to pay on her southern journey — so declined to travel in the large family carriage which was going right through; and Verner Carr meant to accompany Mrs. Paget in her carriage on her southern journey, and so secure for himself the certainty of some important things: the separation from Clare—to begin with—while the way still lay open before him and no utterly self-committing words had yet been said; then the parting of Clare and Violet, before the latter lady, in anger, had made revelations that might injure him; and lastly, he would gain for himself the opportunity of soothing down Mrs. Raymond Paget, and of restoring her to her wonted condition of apparent adoration and submission to himself.

So this was the last day of this stage of his wary intercourse with Clare. To-day he might allow himself a long line, for he would not have to disentangle

it again to-morrow. So to-day he took his place by Clare from the first moment she appeared at the hotel door; took possession of her cloak, and walked by her as they turned all together down the street towards the games.

People were beginning to talk a good deal about this handsome, dark-faced stranger, who was constant all that Meeting-time by the side of the young heiress of the Glen; for, indeed, the party was one that was much and often talked over and discussed, in all the curious points of their respective histories and destinies, throughout the Highlands; and people were interested to know if this graceful, foreign-looking man, with his long, dark moustache and quick, eager eyes, was to be the future Laird of the Glen, with all its wide interests and domain. Verner, as they one and all remarked of him, did not, indeed, look much like a Highland laird, or as a fitting successor to Patrick Erskine, the present master of the Glen.

People had much to say, too, during that Meeting-time, of rumours with regard to the condition of George Erskine's affairs. Many wild and strange stories had reached the North, of his extravagance, of his countless debts, of the bad prospects, altogether, if

he fell heir to the Glen; and people watched the party with much curious interest, wondering often to each other as to what there might be shortly coming, in the different histories of each. And people remarked of both the laird and the colonel, that they were looking old and ill.

The laird was always frail and delicate in aspect indeed, but people said that he was changed this year; and George, well got up and well preserved as he looked when he came full-dress among them, was showing years, they said, and was not the man he had been a short time ago.

All these remarks were being whispered about, as Clare walked, with Verner attendant upon her, into the grounds of the games.

It was a lovely afternoon—a rare thing, indeed, at that season and at that event. The sun was shining brightly upon the scene, upon the yellow corn-fields on the distant slopes of hills that formed the valley, upon woods rich with autumn tints, that clustered among the houses above the lower town, and along the edge of the terrace that stretched high above the river; and the gay sunshine, pouring down upon the little inclosure where the games were held, tipped with

bright bits of light the glittering ornaments of the pipers, drew out into vivid contrast the varied colourings of tartan and silk and tweed, shone upon fair faces and stalwart forms, upon eagle feathers in chieftains' bonnets, and upon bright-hued ostrich plumes from the treasures of Heath or Brown.

There was a large pavilion at one end of the ground, in which the ladies crowded in wet weather, but which they scorned on a fair day like this.

There was a wooden platform in the centre, and on this were performed reels, gillie-callums, strathspeys, and hoolichans, by bold and stalwart competitors, to the admiration and often amusement of the company and for the approbation of the judges, who sat, gravely clad in plaids of varied tartan, and distinguished with plumes of different degree, in a long row upon a bench apart. The pipers played and the dancers footed it indefatigably.

The crowd thickened and dispersed, and often gathered again. People sauntered up and down or sat in knots of two or three, and laughed and were merry together, delighted to meet, and full of news and talk; and Clare, as she strolled among them, with Verner still constant ever by her side, had many a greeting

to exchange, many a cheery word to say, as friends, old and dear, crowded round her, and eager inquiries about times and things and persons of the present and the future and the past, came bubbling from one to the other in a pleasant, incessant stream. Verner was amused at it all, but he became a little cross as the afternoon wore on.

"I think it is a horrid bore," he said, laughing, but a little bitterly at the same time; "a horrid bore, that you have got so many friends, and 'auld lang syne' acquaintances, Miss Erskine, up in your own country here. I think I, for one, prefer you very much in London. I feel rather 'out of it all' while these innumerable affectionate greetings are going on."

"Oh, but you know, Major Carr, they are all such dear old friends—and cousins, too, the most of them. But was I rude? I beg your pardon. Did I seem to be forgetting you, in the midst of them, all this time, while you have been carrying my cloak, too, so very kindly?"

"I do not in the least object to being your mantle-bearer," he answered pleasantly. "Only, if you have a great many more kilted cousins to greet with effusion, I think I had better go and sit down upon that bench

there, under Mrs. Raymond Paget's protection, and relieve guard for Charlie for a bit; while you receive and exchange all these salutes of affection with the divers branches of the house of Erskine whom I see are assembled here."

"I do not think you need do that," she answered; "unless, indeed, you want to go and finish that very interesting conversation in which you were engaged last night with Mrs. Raymond Paget when my uncle took me away. She seemed to have a great deal to say to you, and I dare say she has a great deal more to add to-day; so if you wish to go, Major Carr, why, here is my partner of the country dance, my cousin Hector, if you like to give my cloak to him."

"I think I will keep it, thank you," Verner answered, in a rather pleased and triumphant tone. He was surprised to hear that she had observed him in his talk with Mrs. Raymond Paget, but glad at the same time, as she showed so simply that it had made her jealous of him. "I think I will keep it, and I will not complain again, Miss Erskine, if the cousins number more than the tribe of Romany itself. Come, will you like to walk about again?"

"I know what I should like," said Clare, impul-

sively, as she looked from side to side for a moment, and then up towards the fringe of the hills, where the sun was setting now in a glow of rich crimson and amber beyond Crag Ateraig's grey, rugged peak. "I know what I should like, if I could only get my uncle and father to come."

"And what would that be?" said Verner.

"I should like to walk once round the islands, and far up the river-side, just once go past Duncanan, the house we used to have in the winter sometimes, long, long ago."

"You mean you would like to leave here and go for a walk?" said Verner. "With all my heart. Just exactly what I too would like to do."

"But I must get father or my uncle Lairdie to come."

"Why?" exclaimed Verner, impatiently, and then he went on in a changed, gentle, and persuasive tone. "Will you not come and show *me* the river? Do; there is nothing that I should like so much. See, your father and the laird are busy with the judges; they have pressed them both into the service, and look, the colonel is quite eager over that performance across the

swords. May we not go together? It is not late, Miss Erskine. Do let us go."

"I wonder if I might," said Clare. It seemed a very pleasant thought to have this one quiet, long walk, just this one more, with Verner Carr—along the old beloved river, among the islands high up the rushing stream—just this one walk before they parted to-morrow, to meet in such scenes, and in such pleasant intimacy, no longer.

For London was never like Scotland for pleasant walks and constant meetings and long days of easy intercourse, such as they had now enjoyed so long; and on the yacht, if he came with them, there would be so many, and all always together as they were so apt to be. And to-morrow the Scotch time was to be quite over for her, and he was leaving her in the same strange way again—leaving her half won; her young, eager love nearly all quite wooed, and smiled, and whispered gently away from her own possession, and yet her heart and hand unasked for, no faith between them plighted, no vows exchanged.

She felt she could hardly part with him thus; this one little walk they must have together still. So she went with him, many observant eyes following them,

and many whispered remarks being made as they left the ground together, passed through the crowd with a few parting words from side to side, and walked down under the shadow of the cathedral, and turned round the corner by the lower side.

CHAPTER III.

Round the Islands.

It was a bewitching evening for such a stroll. The river rolled grandly beneath the golden and crimson rays of the sunlight, and far along, up its winding and wooded banks, a road stretched, running close all the way by the rushing stream, and winding past garden and villa, past corn-field and green, gentle slope, until they reached the light bridges that spanned the stream between the islands, and led them back to the town again by the other side.

The islands were a richly wooded cluster in the centre of the deep, swift-rushing stream. In the early summer, when they were gemmed with starry anemones, and wild grape hyacinths in blue delicate bloom, each seemed in itself a complete, fair garden, adorned by a lavishly generous nature, and richly watered into

fertile beauty by the floods of the encircling river. But now, in the autumn, there were no flowers in the rich undergrowth among the thick clustering trees, and the leaves were falling already, strewing themselves, in bits of golden and russet colouring, upon the shady paths.

The light was shadowy under the trees as they stepped from the bridge and passed on across the islands; the branches swept low over the narrow road, the wind whispered gently among them, the twilight gathered dimly in shadowed corners, and the sunset fell still in others in glowing, golden fret-work across the pathways between the autumn leaves.

"I always did think," said Clare, "when I was young, that this island walk was the most romantic thing I knew. I used to lay all sentimental scenes of thrilling fiction, which I either read or imagined for myself, in my early days, upon this very path. Do you not think it is very romantic?" she added.

"Strikingly so," he replied, and then he relapsed into silence again, and walked slowly beside her, swinging his stick impatiently with one hand, and throwing her tweed cloak over his shoulder with the other.

"Look," Clare went on; "I remember, when I was quite a little thing, once coming round by here with uncle Lairdie, and sitting for a whole afternoon just upon that green seat. We had been spending the winter down here, you know, and we used to take long walks together, and talk always about the Glen, and about what we would do when we got back in the spring, for we neither of us could bear leaving it. I remember so well that day—it was the first time that he told me, oh, so many things, I had not had an idea of until then."

"What sort of things?" said Verner, eagerly.

"Oh, about the Glen, you know, and about me, and cousin Marion, and all about—well, some day or other, when things must change, alas! from what they are now."

"What sort of things?" repeated Verner, but very gently this time, as if he would draw her on to speak her thought before she was well aware.

"Oh, things about the Glen, you know—but do not let us speak of it. I never think of it at all. I cannot bear to look forward and realize that some day it may be."

"Will you not tell me?" he said again, softly, in a persuasive, sympathetic tone.

"Tell you? what I mean to say when I speak of—what may be, of what must be, if I live to be old—some day? Oh, Major Carr, you know."

"I do not in the least know what you are talking about," he said.

"About the dear old Glen, about what my uncle told me on the green seat there that February. Oh, Major Carr, you do know about it—for uncle Lairdie told me that everybody in the country knew about it but me—that, some day, you know, if they are gone, it must come to me, and not to cousin Marion. I am so sorry for it all. I cannot bear to think of it from any point of view."

"It *must* all come to you?" he said gently again, with the slightest possible emphasis upon the expressive verb.

"Yes, it must, alas! we cannot, any of us, help it."

And then there was a pause, during which Verner's eyes turned with sudden eagerness and quick impulse of resolution upon her face.

She did not notice him as she walked along, absorbed in her recollections. Her eyes were thought-

fully fixed upon the ground; she did not notice his sudden glance, his quick-drawn breath, and the vivid flush of eagerness that rose almost to his brow, nor did she see that his lips parted to address her, for before one word had dropped from them, she spoke herself again.

"That is to say," she added slowly—"of course, it comes first to father, and then, some day, perhaps, if I live so long, you know, I suppose it must go on to me."

The colour faded from Verner's cheek again, and his lips closed silently upon the unuttered words.

Then things were no better than he had feared they were, and the time for safe action on his part had not yet come. There was a moment's silence, and then in low, suppressed accents he spoke.

"I have known all your brilliant prospects for a long time, Miss Erskine, and that knowledge has quelled me often when I would have pressed closer among the wide and varied circle of your friends."

"I do not know," said Clare, sadly, "why the fact that I must take the Glen some day from cousin Marion, if I live so long, need distance my friends

from me. It is hard enough, I think, without that, as it is."

"Ah," said Verner, in a very melancholy and conclusive tone, "there are many considerations that weigh with *your* friends, Miss Erskine, from which positions commoner than yours are free. A man has many misgivings, and needs much self-assertion and satisfaction before he feels competent to call himself your friend."

"And if I call him so!" said Clare; and then they said no more for a few moments as they climbed the little rising ground from out the islands, and came again on a light suspension bridge.

"Major Carr," Clare began again, hesitatingly, "I wish I had the gift of intuition to understand one half you say; at least, that you have been saying lately. I wish I knew what was troubling you exactly, and why you always make out such a bad case for yourself and your own life. Cannot a friend help you?" she added.

"Ah! Miss Erskine, it is the old story," he said with a sigh, as he came up beside her in the narrow road, and they walked quickly along together down by the river's-edge towards the town again. "It is the

old story; when a man has wasted the best part of his life, and made ducks and drakes of it, and thrown his energies and everything he has got away, he feels himself, at my age, 'quite out of it,' you know, and only able to stand aside, and let a better fellow take the prize for which he longs."

"I do not know why you should feel like that," she said, with gentle sympathy in her tone.

"Why I should? Because I know the history of my own life. But knowing, I can realize at least what a friend like you are *may* be to me. May I tell you, now we are parting again, how much your sympathy and your sweet companionship and your gentle friendship *has* been to me during the weeks gone by?"

"You told me this, just the same as this, Major Carr," murmured Clare, in an almost broken tone, "when we said Good-bye at Lady Arnot's breakfast, at Surley, two months ago, and did I not give you an answer then?"

"You did, indeed, and a sweet answer, kind and gentle as yourself; and you let me feel that I had still your sympathy, and would have still your pleasant friendship, if I ventured ever to follow you to your lovely Glen."

"And did I fail when you came there?" said Clare again.

"Fail? No, no, it is impossible that you could fail. I have sweet, charming days and delightful memories stored up from that bewitching time; and now I am to part from you again, I would ask once more your *souvenir*, your kindly, sympathetic thought for me, as I go out into the loneliness of my life."

"If you are good at remembering, Major Carr," said Clare, in a low tone, "I am sure I can rival you there, for I never can forget, for my part; never anything, anything that once has been."

"Then will you let me come and claim your recollection, when I arrive in London?" he said.

"You know where to find me," she answered. "Until we go to Italy, in January, I shall remain in London, while father goes up and down to Sir Edward Hartopp's, and to all his favourite shooting haunts. I do not think," she added a little wearily, "that I shall go to any of the shooting houses with him this year."

"Then I may come and share your dusky solitude in November, in Curzon Street?" he said lightly. "I

shall be in town also all the autumn months—at least," he added, "if you are there."

"Why should I influence your plans?" said Clare, lightly trying to throw off the pathetic tone which their conversation had acquired. "I will be there, and the fogs will be there, but little else that I know of beside. I do not advise you to come to London in November, Major Carr."

"I think I shall appear," he said quietly. "Ah, we are getting near the town again. How can I thank you sufficiently for according to me this delightful walk? I wonder what Mrs. Raymond Paget and Charlie have been doing?"

* * * * *

One more ball, as cheery and full of energy and enthusiasm as the first had been, and then the gathering was over for the year, and the next morning found all the Glen party collected at the railway station, to take farewell of each other and to start upon their different routes.

It was a stirring scene; this was the busiest day of the season at the big northern terminus. There was a long train ready and crowded from end to end, like the huge one which had started from the Euston Sta-

tion, carrying sportsmen to the Highlands, two months ago; and again family carriages were crammed with big parties, all travelling southward, in company with sportsmen and school children, and pets, canaries, and London domestics, and dogs. Again Ewen and Fanlie, both in a somewhat sleepy and exhausted frame of mind, were worked up to a noisy degree of mirth and excitement, as all the paraphernalia of travel was packed into the carriage, and on the top. Once again the sad Good-bye was going on at the carriage window between uncle Lairdie and his "bonnie birdie," between the brothers, and between Marion and Clare. Verner had come to see them off—Mrs. Raymond Paget was still in bed—he was to start later with her and her husband about twelve o'clock, and they were not going further that night than Perth.

Charlie Keith travelled with the Erskines, and they were going straight through; hoping to reach their cosy nest in Curzon Street by an early hour on the morrow.

"Once more, Good-bye!" said Verner, springing for a moment on to the step of the carriage, at the window by which Clare sat; "till November in Curzon Street, Good-bye!"

"I do not expect to see you," answered Clare,

laughing. "The covers at Hasleigh Court are very good, Major Carr; I do not think you will find London fogs have sufficient attraction in November to drag you away from them."

"We shall see," he replied. "Good-bye, Miss Erskine. Thanks for many pleasant days, thanks for so many happy memories! Once more, till we meet again, Good-bye!"

And he laid his hand upon hers, where it rested upon the window-sash, and his fingers closed over hers for a moment in a soft, lingering clasp. She let him retain her hand and returned his pressure, and for a moment her eyes were raised, with a wistful, tremulous light in them, to his, but she said nothing in farewell or in reply. His lips parted as if to speak again; but he changed his mind apparently, and was silent also. His gaze upon her softened face was full of intense and pathetic feeling, full of tenderness, and undisguised though unuttered love; and the colour kindled upon Clare's cheek and quick, burning tears rushed into her eyes; she struggled to express her farewell with the composure and dignity the position required of her. The contrast between the passionate tenderness of his gaze, speaking such open confession of

eager love for her, drawing an answer so irrepressibly from her frank, bright eyes, and the calm coolness of his uttered words (his lips asking for friendship while his eyes sought so expressively for love), were all quite irreconcilable and incomprehensible to her; she could not arrive at understanding him, at reading his real wishes with regard to her, or in finding (to anything he looked or uttered) quite the right reply. But all filled her with restless doubt, misgiving, and bewilderment, and made her very vexed and angry, both with herself and with him.

"It had not been quite a happy autumn," she thought, as the train glided away from the station, and they were really gone. It had not been altogether a happy autumn, and certainly not a satisfactory gathering, by any means. She was going back to London much in the frame of mind in which she had left it, only she had lost a friend since she came north, in Percy — and had gained feelings much deeper and more intense, and much more fitful and more disturbing as well, for one, whom, in accordance with all her former standards of friendship, she did not think she could, in the inner, hidden recesses of her own heart, call by the calm, simple name of "friend."

CHAPTER IV.

Fest und Treu.

MEANWHILE, Everett Hardy and Percy had had a curious, rambling autumn together.

There had been something about Percy Bligh that had attached Hardy to him from the earliest days of their acquaintance. The earnestness and fidelity of his quiet devotion to Clare; the composure of Percy's character and manners; the *insouciance* and sublime tranquillity with which he had gone down the stream of life, all had vested his society with an attraction for Everett, which he explained by saying that, "Percy, in contradiction to most other people, was a mighty repose to him." He had got to understand the young fellow, and had learnt the art of diving under the cool, tranquil exterior, into the deep well of feeling below. He had learnt to reach the best of Percy (just as Clare had somehow done), and with Everett, even Percy's silence broke down, and he would converse spontaneously, bringing out quaint but shrewd opinions upon men and things.

There was complete understanding between them, and Everett could weigh better than most people the respective value of these two rival aspirants to Clare Erskine's favour. At a very early stage in his observations indeed, had Everett put Percy and Verner Carr into the scales together; and the test had proved, unquestionably, very much to the advantage of his friend.

"How blind women are!" he often said to himself. "How invariably, if the choice is given them, do they pitch upon the wrong man!"

There was nothing more to be said, however, when he left the Glen. He had gone at once in search of Percy, because he knew, as no one else did, what the young fellow was suffering, in his silent and unexpressive way; and he could not stay, moreover, at the old Glen house, to see Verner Carr insinuating himself with dexterous subtilty into Clare's warm, unsuspicious heart, while he thought of Percy, disconsolate and rejected, wandering about in his solemn, silent way, alone. So Everett went off and found him. He told Percy, with very little reference to the Glen or the Erskines, that he wanted to go and do some Norwegian landscapes, exactly at a part of that country

where he knew, as it happened, that a friend of Percy's had a stream; and up there they went—Everett with colours and sketch-book, and Percy with some huge fishing-rods and with numberless big salmon flies of every description and hue. There they had remained throughout the early autumn—Percy spending long, silent days on the river; catching infinite numbers of enormous fish, and going through the labour of catching them, day after day, and hour after hour, with a calm but disconsolate aspect, that implied some satisfaction in performing at least one solemn duty, and offering still this faithful ovation to the goddess of sport; finding some comfort, too, in the process, as he went gravely through with it—saying nothing about his innermost trouble at all.

It was not till late in the season, as they were coming home; returning after a tour through Denmark together; as they were crossing the sea, and sitting smoking in company on the deck one fine, moonlight night, that he suddenly turned his face away from Everett, looked across the dark billowy ocean, took his pipe from between his lips for a moment, and began, *à propos* of nothing, to speak of Clare.

"I say, Hardy," he began—"I wish you would tell

me—before we get home to the other side, you know —I wish you would just tell me, if she is going to marry that fellow; whether it is really settled beyond recall or mistake."

"I do not know," said Everett; "nothing was settled, at all events, when I left the Glen."

"But you think she is?" continued Percy. "I expect she means it, don't you?"

"I could not make out what *he* meant, to begin with," replied his friend.

"What Carr meant? By Jove! Everett, there is no doubt of that, is there? Of course it was as plain as need be, only I was such a blind ass of a fellow, I never saw anything till you pointed it out to me and told me what to look for; then I saw it all clearly enough, that very last night, you know."

"He is an odd, slippery kind of customer," continued Everett. "I really give you my word, Percy, I do not know what he meant. I had been looking on at his little game for a good while in the summer-time, in London, and all about, and I declare I do not know; but I do *not* think the fellow is in love with Éclair."

"Not in love with her, by George!" exclaimed

Percy, with sudden excitement. "What does he want, then? Hang him! can't he let other fellows alone? We were much jollier, the *old* lot of us, Everett, before the colonel took in Verner Carr."

"We were, old chap. I wish, with all my heart, Mrs. Raymond Paget had kept tighter hold of him, and not let him slip into a place in our set; but there he is now, Percy, in with the whole thing, like the rest of us, and yet, not for the life of me, can I make out his game. He is not in love with Éclair, though I think it is pretty likely he may be in love with something else."

"With her chances, eh? But, by Jove! Everett, if that is what he's looking to, he may be well sold there. If George's duns get their fingers upon the old Glen, there won't be much left to come down to her. Not that she need want a rap of it, bless her, not as far as I am concerned."

"Perhaps Verner Carr knows as much as you do, old chap, and does not altogether agree with you," Everett answered, with a little sardonic laugh. "I expect that is it, Percy; he has been reconnoitring up in the Highlands, and is holding on."

"But probably it is all settled before now," Percy added, disconsolately.

"I do not expect it," Everett replied again. "Carr is a very wary bird, and Éclair's future is uncertain."

Percy was silent then for a moment, and puffed at his pipe, his heavy blue eyes wandering away towards the sea-line again.

"By Jove! Everett," he said again, at length; "what an ass I have made of myself, to be sure, about her—I, who had such a contempt for the kind of thing! Do you remember that first year she came in the yacht to Monaco with us?—a little, slim bit of a thing she was, in a blue-braided yachting dress, with that brown, wavy hair of hers, and those big eyes looking up like a child at you, with such pretty glances in them, like the sun on a bit of the river when you are fishing of a summer's day, and full of such pretty ways, and so demure with us all, like a little Quaker, only as full of fun as a kitten, too—eh? do you remember her? I have liked her ever since then, Everett. She always seemed to make a different fellow of me—and to make a changed, bright thing of life when she was there. And no one ever came between us till this Carr turned up one day at Naples. He

came on board the yacht with Mrs. Raymond Paget. George asked him to come and cruise, and so he got in, you know, and, worse luck to it, he has stuck to us ever since."

"You will get over it, Percy, old chap. You cheer up," Everett said presently, in a lively and encouraging tone.

"I cannot—that is just it," exclaimed Percy, turning round upon Everett and looking straight up with a very despairing expression in his steady, faithful eyes. "I cannot," he repeated; "it sticks to me, I tell you; I never lose it for a moment; and, by Jove! I do not think I want to get over it, and that's the oddest thing of all. It is taking all the salt out of life for me. I don't care for anything—not for one single thing I do. I never cease to see her, just there before me, Everett, and never cease to long for her one moment of the day. And it is a horrid pain—gnawing away, as it were, at the very cords of a fellow's life; and yet I don't want to lose the feeling and the thought of her always before me; and I think I will stick steadily to it, Everett, come what may, you know, and let it cost me what it will. I am the sort of man that has only one die to throw on that kind of thing, old fellow, you

see, and I have thrown it, so there it is for ever. I cannot pick it up again."

"Time works wonders," said Everett, philosophically, and then, after a pause, he rose and stood silent in front of Percy. There seemed nothing more to say.

"Good night," said Percy laconically, and then, as he said nothing and remained still sitting there, Everett moved slowly away and left him and walked once down the length of the deck.

Percy was still smoking steadily when he came back again, leaning on the coil of ropes, his eyes turned out towards the sea, and with his usual quiet, resolute expression upon his face.

"Come along, old chap," said Everett. "I am going off to turn in."

"All right," said the other.

"Good night, then;" and Everett, after looking at him hesitatingly for a moment, decided that there was nothing more he felt desirable for him to do or say. "Good night," he repeated again, and then, with one more glance back at his friend, he turned down the companion ladder.

Percy was quite alone then.

It was a grand night at sea—just the sort of night

when the salt breeze, blowing strong and fresh from the surging billows, beats upon the face and temples with a stimulating power, stirs the pulses, warms the blood, and makes the brain whirl in a giddy delirium with a strange intoxication caused by the strong, fresh air.

It was dark, for heavy clouds had come rolling up over the sky and obscured the glittering moonbeams which had come flooding down upon them when they had first sat smoking there.

The steamer rolled swiftly on, over tossing billows and bounding spray, ploughing the deep, blue waters, and leaving far behind her a silvery ray, marking her course over the ocean, where her bows had cut the water and her whirling screw had struck the foaming waves. The masts and rigging rose dark against the sky, and volumes of fiery smoke poured forth from the funnel's mouth and rolled heavily over Percy's head, and then floated behind them across the dark, cloudy heavens towards the dusky horizon far away.

The steamboat tossed and rolled on, the funnel cast forth its smoke and fire, and the steersman was changed often at the helm, and the blue darkness of the autumn night yielded before the warm flush of the

morning, and still Percy was there, sitting sometimes on the coil of rope where Everett left him, rising often to pace the deck in his long ulster, with his hands plunged deep in his pockets, and with slow, steady footsteps to and fro.

"Poor old Percy!" as they often called him. His heart was very strong and faithful. It was still a very bad business for him.

"Fest und treu" was the only motto by which *he* could describe or spell out the tangled story of his life.

CHAPTER V.

In Curzon Street.

It was six weeks later. Everett had been down in Hampshire, visiting his own few belongings, finishing up a lot of rough sketches he had brought home with him, and meditating upon his winter plans.

He had not heard from Clare for a long time, and was wondering, accordingly, what the Erskines' set, father and daughter, and friends, were going to do. He had finished his sketches, and so, by way of an

excuse, he brought them with him, and up to town he came to inquire for Clare.

Percy had left him at Hull the morning after they landed on English *terra firma* together, and had gone down, he believed, to Wynton, and was there still with his brother, shooting the covers, and bearing his own troubles as usual, in his own quiet way. And all the men of their set were scattered about too, occupied in much the same pursuits, shooting pheasants, setting to work for a winter's hunting, paying country visits here and there.

Everett, arriving about this time, late one afternoon in town, turned his steps towards Curzon Street, thinking pleasantly, as he walked along, of the friendly meeting which he promised himself, and of the cosiness of a twilight talk in Clare's little drawing-room over a cup of tea. Just turning round the corner out of Chesterfield Street, in the soft, dusky light (coming towards him with his usual light, easy step), he saw Charlie Keith, walking fast, with his eyes fixed upon the pavement and with an absent and concentrated air.

"Halloa!" Everett exclaimed, unceremoniously, and stopped him with a hand upon his shoulder and a

friendly salute. "Halloa! What's the hurry, old fellow? Whither away so fast?"

"Hardy, by Jove! How do you do? Where have you sprung from, I should like to know? I never saw you a bit coming along in the fog."

"I dare say not; you were not looking my way," answered Everett, shortly. "But how are you, my boy, eh? Are things all right with you?"

"Right as a trivet, thanks; all right, I am as jolly as ever. And you, old fellow, where have you been hiding all this last century or two?"

"I have been to Norway."

"Norway! have you? Well, that is not a bad place, and where is Bligh, eh? Was he not with you?"

"Yes; and we came back together. I fancy he is at Wynton now."

"Is he? the poor old duffer, by Jove!" said Charlie Keith, pityingly, from which it may be surmised that the condition of poor Percy's affection was not unknown to him, and the evident connection of ideas in his mind confirmed this, as it revealed itself in his next remark. "I say, Hardy," he exclaimed, suddenly

changing his tone and turning eagerly to Everett, "have you seen Éclair lately, eh?"

"No, not for months," said Everett; "nor heard from her, for some time. I am on my way to see her now; to ask if she is in town, at all events."

"Yes, she is in town—that is right, do go and see her. You don't know anything about them—not about any of them, eh?"

"Nothing; I was about to ask you," said Everett.

"Well, I tell you what it is," said Keith, with much concern in his good-natured, rapid tones; "I think there is something up with them—there's some trouble on. Éclair is not herself, Hardy—not a bit of her; and, besides that, she is awfully cut up to-day, specially, for she has had some rather bad news from the Glen."

"From the Glen? What, anything wrong there—the old laird—Miss Erskine? Why, what is the matter, Charlie, up there?"

"They don't tell her much," Keith continued. "But she showed me the letter; and, to tell the truth, I don't like the looks of it. The old laird has had some kind of stroke—'tis not much, they say; but she is very down about it—awfully down, Hardy; but you go and see her—that is all right."

"Is she alone?" said Everett.

"Yes, quite. She has been in town by herself for the last fortnight."

"And where is her father?" said Everett.

"Down at Hartopp's, I believe; and, oh! I say, Hardy, she does not know anything about *that*, you know—but things are awfully bad with him. They tell me the Jews are going to 'close in' and sell him up, before the old laird dies. Perhaps Éclair does know something about it, for she looks dreadfully low, whatever is the cause. I say, Hardy, I wonder what Carr means in that quarter?"

"What do you think?" said Everett. "You were all the autumn at the Glen."

"Oh, nothing came off there—that I am sure of. Mrs. Raymond Paget never took her finger out of the pie. Carr did not have a chance, even if he wanted to. He made hard running, certainly, at the Meeting, and left Mrs. Raymond Paget entirely upon my hands; and a bad time I had of it in consequence, I can tell you; but nothing was squared up—I know that much from what Verner said at the St. James's the other night himself."

"Is he in town?"

"He has been; perhaps he is gone now. But I cannot make out what he is after. He knows well enough what a big leak George has in his craft, poor old fellow! So perhaps he's afraid to take the final plunge; but he blows hot and cold, at all events, in a pretty even current; and I cannot make Éclair out in the matter, any more than him."

Charlie Keith's powers of penetration were not very deep.

Everett paused a moment.

"I will go and see her, then," he said. "I hope it is nothing serious with the old laird."

"I hope not, by Jove! I am sure. But you go. I am awfully glad you have turned up, Hardy. I began to conclude that you and Bligh had become food for the fishes in the course of your unknown voyages in some mysterious sea. I am awfully glad that you have turned up!"

Everett walked on and rang the bell presently, at the little house in the corner of Curzon Street; and in two minutes Clare's tall footman was conducting him upstairs.

It was quite dark, but there was only firelight in the room as he entered—a warm, dancing firelight,

throwing a glow of rippling colour over pictures and mirror and all the little cosy furnishings; over sketches of his own, that lined the walls on every side, full of pleasant reminiscences of their many journeys together in foreign lands; over all the soft, harmonious combinations of colouring which he had helped her to select; over low, cushioned chairs; over flower and bookstand; and finally revealing Clare herself, and her big colley-dog, and her father's favourite black-and-tan terrier, all clustered on the rug together in a sociable enjoyment of the warmth and glow from the fire.

She turned round as he entered, but had no time to rise to greet him before he had sprung forward and was clasping her outstretched hand between both his own.

"Everett! I am so delighted to see you."

"And I am enchanted beyond words, Éclair, to find that you are in town."

"I am *so* glad to see you," she continued, slowly rising from the rug, and gently shaking the little tan-nosed dog from off her dress. "How good of you to come and find me out! Yes, here I am in town, and for the first time in my life in November."

"And your father?"

"Oh, he is at Quentin with Sir Edward. You know they have a big battue down there this week, but I did not care to go; somehow, I much preferred coming back to town when we left Lady Arnleigh's, and oh, I am so glad I came, for, Everett, I have not told you, I am so dreadfully unhappy, I have had such bad news from the Glen. I had this letter from cousin Marion this morning, and she tells me that uncle Lairdie has had some terrible illness, quite suddenly, you know. I cannot quite understand about it, she has written so little; but look, Everett, you read it, and tell me what you think."

He took the letter from her hand after looking up anxiously into her face all the time she spoke, scanning it in the dancing firelight as well as he could; and towards the firelight he now bent with the letter and tried to read, by its uncertain lustre, Miss Erskine's hastily written lines.

"Stop!" exclaimed Clare. "I quite forgot, Everett Wait till John has brought the light."

She rang the bell hastily, and he waited; following her movements with his watchful, searching gaze, as she crossed the rug before him, rang, and then returned again, and sank down slowly, with a certain

languor of movement quite new to her, upon a low chair by the chimney corner.

The servant entered instantly, carrying a lamp into the room. He set it down, closed the blinds and curtains, and then raised the folding leaves of the little tea-table, and placed it by Clare's side; and while the man moved about the room, she remained silent a moment, watching his movements with a restless, impatient glance, and Everett could look again at her, and study her face anew, in the flood of light the lamp shed over the room.

The sunny, waving hair was all unchanged as it rippled back from her fair temples with their delicate, faint tracery of blue veins; but that was nearly all that *was* unchanged about her, in the few short months since he had seen her last! She seemed scarcely the same Clare, for all the brightness that suggested their favourite pet name for her was quite gone. Her cheeks had paled, the sunny lustre had left her clear, blue eyes, and the proud, free, open expression that used so particularly to distinguish her, had changed into a hesitating, tremulous, almost plaintive look, as her eyes met his when she turned again at last towards him and the servant left the room.

"Read Marion's letter, now, Everett," she said, "and tell me what you think it means. I cannot make it out at all."

He read. The lines were few, the information scanty, but there was a great deal implied in the carefully chosen words; implied and yet concealed; insinuated, as if in preparation, and veiling, as they strove gently to communicate what they wished and yet feared to tell.

The old laird had been ill, and the results of this mysterious illness, Marion hinted, were unknown. Clare must not alarm herself, but they must say "God's will be done!" "The laird was an old man, and the stroke had been a severe one," but, he "sent his love to his little birdie," and she "was not to be sad for him!"

"He was well six days ago, when he last wrote to me," said Clare; "and his letter made me quite happy for the entire day. It was so like himself—so full of brightness and of beautiful things, and of sweet, dear sayings about the old Glen, and about next summer-time when we would be all together: he and Marion, and father and me; and since then it seems he has

had this illness. What can it be, Everett? What kind of illness could come so quickly?"

"Things come very quickly in this life sometimes, dear little friend," said Hardy, and he stood looking with a blank, dismayed expression, for a moment upon the few careful but very ominous lines. They struck coldly to his kind heart, for they carried, to his perceptions, a sad message, very tenderly but very surely conveyed; and Clare, with all her troubled anxiety, seemed quite unconscious of it; she was perplexed over the letter, but failed to read it with undoubting clearness, as he had done.

The laird had had a stroke, it was very evident to him—the first of those unerring warnings that come heralding the mighty change. The first, and, perhaps, the next was still far distant; but yet it was that first, which is so surely the beginning of the end. And she did not see it. She was so ignorant, so unsuspicious of the result of events; so unconscious of what might be coming for her, now close and near; what, indeed, lay certainly before her in the way of great and unexpected change.

If the laird died, then George Erskine was the owner of the old Glen house and all around it; and if

George inherited, what would too surely be the fate of all?

"Does your father know this?" he said slowly, at length, for he feared to frighten her, and yet could not bear that she should remain so unconscious, so unprepared.

"No, he knows nothing yet; I am just going to send him off the letter. I am so glad you came in to see it, Everett, before five o'clock."

"You have only just time," he said. "I think you ought to send it to him immediately, without losing a post."

"So I will," she answered. "Oh, Everett, I do hope the darling lairdie is not very ill! Oh, how I wish I was up there with them! I should cheer them, you know; and read to him, and sing the songs he is most fond of, and help Marion to nurse him, and take care of him the whole winter through. Only—ah, dear! how can I leave father?—I cannot let him go off to the Mediterranean alone, and he cannot go to the Glen in winter, you know, Everett. It does hurt his rheumatism so very much."

She had moved to her writing-table as she spoke,

and busied herself (while Everett stood watching her from the fire) in closing and sealing up her letter.

Suddenly she took up her pen.

"I will put in one line to papa," she said, "and beg him, if it is possible, to let me go up north and see uncle Lairdie again, just for a little while. I could go so easily, Everett; quite alone, you know, with Fanlie and John."

"How *is* your father?" said Everett presently, and the question was really in direct answer to her last remark, for he had been reading Miss Erskine's short letter again, and it struck him very forcibly, as he perused it, that the next post, most probably, would bring a summons for Old George Erskine to the Glen. "How would he really stand the journey in this winter weather?" he thought, and so he spoke his thoughts aloud in these questioning words, "How has your father been all these autumn months?"

"Father? Oh, quite well, I think! He has been shooting a great deal, and we have had such large parties at the Arnleighs', and at the Ludlows', and at the Veres'; and, oh, I am so tired of it all, Everett," she continued, suddenly turning round to face him

again, and coming back to stand beside him upon the rug.

"Why, what has come to you, Clare?"

He was looking straight at her as he spoke, and she winced under his steady gaze for a moment; then turned slightly from him and looked away into the glowing fire. Her thoughts seemed to wander for an instant; an absent look crept into her eyes; then she brought back her thoughts again and said, still looking away from him into the burning coals—

"I have missed you *so* much, Everett; I am so glad to see you back again."

"I do not feel as if I saw *you* again, Éclair," he answered. "It does not seem to be you somehow, only somebody else."

"What has happened to me?" she said, looking round upon him with a sweet, winsome smile. "Am I not myself?"

"Not the least in the world," he answered, "except in your warm characteristic welcome of your old friends. There you are unchanged, Éclair, indeed."

"I have often told you," she said, laughing again up at him with what she strove to make her old, bright manner—"I have often told you, and told all

my friends, that that is a way in which I never change; and I want to hear of such a friend now, Everett. Tell me something of Percy Bligh," she said.

"Percy? poor old boy! He is not given to change either, Éclair. A couple of months in the rough winds of Norway did not prevail to blow away for him the fairy gossamer web that had wound round his heart. He is in as bad a way as ever, Éclair, so the less you think about him the better, perhaps."

"Dear old Percy! I often think about him," she said. "If I could only help him; if I could only make him happy again!"

"If you cannot, nobody else can, I am afraid," said Everett, laconically. "So he must be left to fight it out in his own odd way."

"Poor, dear Percy," she repeated; "I cannot get accustomed to doing without him—he is connected in my mind with such numbers of happy days. Tell me, Everett, do you not think that he will ever come and see me again?"

"Not just now, I think," said Everett, and then he turned away from her a little, and paused a moment in meditation, while he picked up his stick and hat.

"I must be going, Éclair," he said.

"Come again, then, Everett."

"Yes, to-morrow," he answered, "I shall be anxious to hear what news you have had from the Glen."

"Yes, do come to-morrow; only——" and she paused, cutting short her sentence and reddening just a little with a faint, sudden flush, as she turned her face away from him once more.

"Only," he repeated, and waited, but she said no more.

Then Everett came close up to her again, as she stood with fingers slowly entwining, and with averted face upon the rug, and, looking wistfully at her for a moment, he said—

"And what have you been doing, Éclair? You have told me nothing of all that has happened since I went away."

She flushed a vivid crimson, this time all over her soft, fair cheek, but the colour faded instantly, and she was quite pale again before she spoke.

"I have nothing to tell you, Everett; I have been doing nothing, only (since we came from Lady Arnleigh's you know) I have been staying quite quietly here."

"And have you had no one to keep you company all these dark afternoons? Poor little Éclair! no wonder your sunlight is a little clouded since I saw you two months ago! You have been all solitary, in your little nest here, all these black, foggy days?"

"Papa is away, you know, Everett, but—well," she added, looking bravely and a little defiantly up at him; "now and then I have seen some nice old friend —like you!"

"Friend as true and devoted, I trust. I hope, indeed, that you have many such, Éclair. Good-bye! I will not come to-morrow, unless you send for me. That unexplained 'only' was enough for me. Tell me all about it, Éclair, whenever you are ready and inclined."

"You are quite mistaken, Everett; I have really nothing to tell you," she said; and then he took leave of her, and with a rather heavy heart—because of many things for her sake—went slowly away.

CHAPTER VI.

The Brothers—Gone together.

"COME to me! come quickly to me at once, Everett! I have no one to advise me, and I have a terrible letter to-day!"

This message, hastily written in pencilled lines upon a scrap of note paper, was brought to Hardy the next forenoon, fortunately before he had started upon his plans for the day. It was in Clare's writing, and he went at once to answer it by his presence as she desired. What *had* happened he had a very shrewd suspicion and a very clear idea. There was more news from the Glen, no doubt, this morning; and the truth that had flashed instantly upon him, as he had read Marion's report yesterday afternoon, was now forcing itself upon Clare. She was realizing what he had sadly foreseen. He went off at once to her. Poor child! he thought, as he hurried rapidly along, what a good thing it was he had come up from Hampshire! How strange that he should be the one appointed just now to help her, to stand by as an elder brother, to

support her through the trouble that was impending close and near! How curiously placed in the world she was, with no relations within call or reach of her; with so many fair-day friends, and with so few whom she could lean on in an hour of sorrow, or send for at a time of need, save the odd and diversified group of men with whom her father had surrounded her throughout his wandering and light-hearted days!

What was Old George about, thought Everett, as he stopped at the door in Curzon Street, that he had not come to her at once, at the first whisper of trouble at the Glen?—and where was Verner Carr? She had not mentioned him, save by that distant hint, that today she might have some visitors whom she did not wish Everett to disturb.

Poor child! they seemed none of them much fit to take care of her, or to stand between her and any sudden gusts that might come upon her, of the common angry storms of life.

"Thank God!" said Everett gravely to himself as he walked up the stairs "that I came home from Norway, and did not go down to Venice at once, as I had thought of doing. There are rough days coming, I fear, for our bright Éclair."

He was shown into the drawing-room, as on the day before, but it was empty. Éclair was not in the room, only the big colley occupied the rug by himself this morning, stretching his large brown limbs comfortably before the glowing fire. He was too sleepy even to raise his head to notice Everett, who called to him as he came into the room, "Well, good dog, and how are you?"

"Miss Clare is upstairs, I suppose, sir," said the servant, as he ushered Hardy in. "I will tell her. She is very much upset, sir, by this bit of bad news."

"Eh? Is it very bad, John? The old laird—is he very ill? Has there been another stroke?"

"The laird? Oh, he is very weakly. That was the report of Miss Erskine's letter this morning; but it is the colonel. What, Mr. Hardy! have you not heard?"

"The colonel?" cried Everett. "Why, no; what do you mean?" he exclaimed. "It was only about her uncle Miss Clare told me yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, it is her father to-day, sir. What! you have not heard? He has had an attack, out shooting, yesterday. It was apoplexy, I fancy; it must be that or something else of the kind."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hardy in consternation and amazement. "Then it was not about her uncle that Miss Clare wrote to me this morning, after all?"

"Both, sir, I expect; and, indeed, I was not surprised at it. I was scarcely astonished, Mr. Hardy, when, this morning, the letter came. Do you not know the old saying up there in the Highlands? I have heard it many a time among the people at the Glen. 'The twin-brothers, sir, will go together.' There is an old woman by the bridge above the falls there—I have heard her repeat it many and many a time—'The one will not see the sun set that has risen for the last time upon the other.' No doubt it is coming true, sir; but I am real sorry for our poor young lady. Sit down, Mr. Hardy, and I will tell her you are here."

Everett sat down, indeed quite bewildered by the suddenness of John's communication; by the weird effect, upon his mind and imagination, of the report of this old prophecy of the Moray-Erskines—a people whose family sayings seemed always to come true. And, as he glanced round the little room, his heart was full of sorrow for the bright, fair girl whom he could remember, such a few short months ago, so happy, so unconscious of death and tears and trouble,

fitting up this pretty house for her friends and herself, assisted in her choice of everything by his critical and fastidious taste.

He loved this dainty drawing-room of Clare's. It was a temple consecrated to many pleasant memories and formed a picture that often floated before his mind in distant and far other scenes—the background always of the figure of Clare, with her frank, limpid eyes and sunny, waving hair.

It was a plainly furnished room, and had few of the flimsy or bagatelle decorations of muslin and ribbons, Cluny lace and gim-crack china, which characterized generally the little doll houses of Belgravia or Mayfair. For the trim simplicity that evinced in Clare's attire the style of her likings was evident here again, tempered and decorated, indeed, by touches of his own. The walls were a soft French grey, well suited to set off the numbers of pretty water-colour drawings that were crowded upon them, from his own pencil and brush, illustrative, all of them, of other times and scenes. The tone of the room, in its furnishings and hangings, was a soft violet; the chairs were few, but all large and low and luxurious; the floor, covered with light Indian matting, above which

a beautiful, thick Indian rug, spread before the fireplace, provided warmth and comfort for the colley and the tan. Clare's flowers and book-stands, her piano, and very business-like writing-table, with all the rich and beautiful appointments with which her father loved to provide her, all evinced the same solid but costly tastes which distinguished everything in Old George's possession, from his daughter's drawing-room to his drag.

"Plain, my dear fellow, certainly, by all means, quite unostentatious, but always the very best of its kind. It is cheaper to give three hundred guineas, my dear boy, for a good horse than a fifty-pound note for one that is not worth his keep."

How many of such characteristic speeches had Everett heard repeated and reiterated here by Old George, in his confidential moods, when he had button-holed some special friend on the hearth-rug, after one of his cosy dinners downstairs! How vividly he could recall the old man, with his gay presence, his brilliant smile, his cool, reckless, lavish, indifferent way of taking all the serious things of life, his generosity to his friends, and his utter disregard of his creditors! How many a pleasant evening they had spent, as the

favoured chosen guests of Old George Erskine, here in his daughter's violet room! and now—what was he to hear about him?

He had time for many thoughts and observations, for all these reminiscences, and for many fears and speculations beside, before Clare came to him. For thought travels rapidly, and memory, helped by associations, sweeps quickly over a vast retrospect at times, and he had passed from point to point over many questions of Clare's future and past history before the door opened and she entered at last.

"Everett, how good of you!"

"Not at all; I am only so thankful that I am in town."

"And so am I. Oh, Everett! what shall I do? My father—my dear old father and uncle Lairdie both ill; so far away from each other, and both at the very same time. What shall I do? I was just planning to start at once to uncle Lairdie when I have this dreadful news of my father to-day."

"From whom have you heard?" he said. "Sit down, Éclair, and tell me all about it. You look worn and tired. All this is very sudden for you; tell me from whom have you heard? What do they say?"

"I heard first, by the early post, from Marion. See, here is her letter, and I am sure her report is bad enough. I was so distressed at that first, and had made up my mind that, in spite of everything, I would go there. I could not bear her to be in trouble and uncle Lairdie so ill, and still I not to be there; I made up my mind to go to them by the mail to-night, and I had told Fanlie, and was going to get ready all my things, and had sat down to write to father, Everett, when this dreadful letter from Sir Edward came. Look, Everett, what shall I do? I must not think of uncle Lairdie; I must go to poor father now."

Everett took the second letter from her hand. He had been glancing through Marion's hurried lines as she had been speaking to him, and thinking that they, with all they concealed but implied, contained news that was bad enough; and he had raised his eyes to her face as she concluded, and taken Sir Edward's letter silently from her hand, and paused an instant, even before he looked at it, to scan with tender, sympathetic, and pitying gaze the delicate, tremulous lines of her young face.

How changed she was! how dim was the bright, sunny light of her laughing eyes! how worn! Surely,

he thought, this had not all come in one night and day of alarm and sorrow! Had this strange, indescribable look, as if a blight had swept over her, all come since the arrival of Marion's first intelligence from the Glen, only twenty-four hours ago? Or, was there yet another expression in her eyes, beyond the grief and anxiety and bewilderment of her double and sudden grief? Was there not another look of some ceaseless and hidden pain, something besides and behind all this?—some trouble for which he could offer no spoken sympathy nor give any sort of help?

He turned his glance down, after a moment, upon Sir Edward Hartopp's letter.

"My dear young lady," it ran, "do not alarm yourself, for God's sake, I beg of you. I cannot bear to be the teller of bad news. I cannot forgive myself when I think it is to be my hard fate to bring even a passing cloud upon your sunny countenance, a sweet, tender tear to your radiant orbs, and to wring a sigh from your light heart; but I feel a stern and solemn duty impels me, though most unwillingly, to take up

my pen and to communicate to you the intelligence that we have our dear friend, the colonel, here an invalid upon our hands. Do not alarm yourself, I entreat you, my dearest young lady. Let me assure you that he will receive here every possible care; that all your own fair hands could do and loving heart suggest shall be done for him; and that, moreover, if your gentle, filial impulse impels you to fly hither to his side, you will be a welcome and honoured guest in my humble abode. The doctor gives us every hope, I assure you, and things, we may really trust, look well. It was a sudden seizure; I was standing by him in the turnip-field, and a splendid covey had risen just in reach of our guns, and I turned to the colonel to give him the fire, as in my own covers I was in duty bound; and I saw him stagger and reel back, and change colour and fall. Of course, I knew what had happened, for it was just that way poor Lindsay of the Blues went down, at a huge battue at Lord Warmington's, when his grace the late Duke of Saxe-Coburg was on the ground. But, poor George! a better fellow never carried a gun.

Compose yourself, my dear young friend, and forgive me my performance of this painful duty. Rest

assured that all the most assiduous care can do for your father shall be done.

"I am, with many compliments,

"Yours faithfully,

"EDWARD HARTOPP.

"Quentin Court, November 10th."

"Oh, Everett! what do you think of that?" Clare broke out, in a trembling, tearful voice; for Hardy had read the curious epistle aloud, in a low tone, into which uncontrollable concern and dismay had crept as he went on. "Oh, Everett! what do you think of it?"

"He has had a fit, evidently," said Everett. "Poor old colonel! How confusedly Sir Edward puts it all! What an idiotic letter! but I fear there is no doubt about it, Éclair."

"But a fit!—what kind of a fit do you suppose it is?—very bad, Everett, do you think? Oh! you do *not* think there is any danger for him?" she cried.

"It is impossible to say, Éclair," he answered sadly. "But it is very perplexing and strange. Had he heard of his brother's illness, do you know?"

"No; I am sure not. There was no one who would have written to him. Marion had not the least idea where he was, you see, for we have been moving about

just lately so much, from house to house, and she only wrote here yesterday, to me. Oh, Everett! do you think it is very bad?"

"It looks bad," he said presently, again. "I am very sorry, Éclair. What would you like to do? Shall I go down this afternoon to Quentin and telegraph to you as soon as I get there?"

"Oh, Everett, I must go myself," she replied.

"Would you wish it? Very well," he answered. "Then I will telegraph to say you are coming, and I will go down with you, Éclair, to-night."

"Will you? Oh, you good, dear, faithful Everett! What a friend to me you have been! what should I do without you! Does it not seem strange, I feel so alone now that trouble has come upon me? Surely all other girls are not placed just as I am, Everett, do you think they are?"

"All have to act for themselves sooner or later, I expect, Éclair, and I am sure none have more faithful friends than are ready to act for you."

"No, I am sure not; I have so many. Oh, you have every one of you always been so kind to me, and I am glad *you* have come back to me just now. Look, Everett, let us write a telegram. We will send John

with it immediately, and say I will be at Quentin to-night. My poor, dear father, and then uncle Lairdie! Oh, how I wish I could be with both of them at once!"

"The laird has your cousin," said Everett, rising to walk with her to the writing-table. "If you will go to either, Éclair, I think I agree with you, that you should consider your father first. Poor, dear old George!" he added again. He glanced down once more upon Sir Edward's communication, and then he shook his head. "Look here, Éclair," he said, suddenly, "Will you let me go down first and see if your father does really want you? It may not be so very bad, and it is only a house full of men down there, you know."

"Yes, yes, I know all that; but, Everett, if my father is really ill, oh, I should like to go to him," she said. "I might read to him and amuse him, so much, you know, if he is obliged to stay in bed."

"Humph!" said Everett, laconically, and then he paused a moment, scarcely knowing what further he should say. "I do not think it is that kind of illness, you know. I do not judge so, at least, from Sir Edward's letter."

"You think he is not laid up in bed, then?" she persisted.

"I am sure, Éclair," he answered, in a despairing tone; "I am sure I cannot tell, but do let me go down first, and see, at least see, before you come, how things really are. I could write back, or telegraph, and tell you everything then," he added, in a persuasive tone.

"Oh, Everett, do you think I ought?"

She had sat down at her writing-table during the last few words, and had drawn her blotting-book towards her to write the telegram. She paused before she wrote it, and looked up to gain an answer, and to gather counsel from his face, and she saw that his eyes, in their thoughtful and considerate gaze, had wandered from her face and from Sir Edward's letter (which he still held open in his hand), and that they had fixed themselves, half-consciously, upon an envelope that lay with the address upwards on the corner of the table just where he stood. It was addressed in clear, well-formed letters; he could not help reading Clare's name and direction, even in one passing glance, and the firm handwriting was one he knew. It was a large, square envelope, and it bore a foreign post-mark, and a French Imperial stamp. His eyes rested but for

one moment, and then were raised to hers. A deep flush had swept rapidly over her cheeks, as it had done yesterday, when he had distantly approached Verner Carr's unuttered name. As then, it left her paler and more tired-looking than before, and with a curious, restless, embarrassed expression, combating the deep concern and grave sorrow upon her face.

She took up the letter, however, in her firm, little, white hand, and looked straight at him, not avoiding the subject any longer, and regaining in a few seconds her composure and self-control.

"Major Carr is in Paris," she said. "Do you recognize his writing? I almost thought he was coming over, and that I should have had a visit from him to-day."

"Oh, indeed," said Everett, quietly, answering her words with a matter-of-course composure in his manner, instantly rivalling her own. "I have not seen Carr for a good while, but yet I recognized his writing just now. He is in Paris, is he?"

"Yes, his friend, Mrs. Raymond Paget, you know, has an apartment there."

"Indeed!"

Then there was a pause again. Clare had evidently

nothing further to announce to him, or, if she had, she did not mean to announce it then; so he turned away a little after a few minutes as she quietly laid her letter down again, without any further remark. But he was thinking fast and sadly for her, sighing in his kind, deep heart, over the complications of her curious position; over her solitude—the solitude so unguarded and uncontrolled, in which circumstances had left her here, as in many another place before now (while her father shot, hunted, raced, or in any other way amused himself), and she had been left to choose friends and associates as she pleased.

"Is Lady Arnleigh in town?" he said, presently.

"No, Everett; why?"

"Only I should like to have seen her," he said.

"Oh, she is never in town, you know, at this time of year. They are shooting the covers in Herefordshire, and, of course, Lady Arnleigh is entertaining his lordship's friends; but I will tell her you asked for her, Everett. I had a letter from her yesterday, and must write her a line at once, if I can."

"Yes, do," said Everett, decidedly. "Tell her about your father and the laird—tell her you are here, Éclair,

and that—well, that I have gone down to Quentin to-day, and that I will write to her from there."

"No, Everett, I will not write that to her, for the best of reasons—it would not be true, for I have made up my mind that I shall go down with you myself."

"Will you? very well, then," he replied. "Then I will accompany you, as I said. Will you be ready, Éclair, by three o'clock?"

"Is that the first train?" she asked.

"Yes, the first express to Wales; the other went down this morning at ten. But that will take us to Quentin by bed-time, so I will come round for you, Éclair, if you will be ready then."

"Very well," she said, "so be it; I will order the carriage at three."

"It is a bad business," Everett said to himself, as he went out and walked along the dusky streets to his own little rooms—"it is a very bad business, and I see pretty well, in one way, how it is going to end. Oh, bother those Highland prophecies! Fancy, the two poor old gentlemen at once!—the fine old laird and George. God bless me, it is a very sad business! and how Éclair will take it all, Heaven knows! And Verner

has got his finger in still, I see—worse luck to him! I should like to have a glimpse of that correspondence. The slippery fish! I wonder what he has found out about the inheritance, and in what direction he is playing his game? Confound them all—Raymond Pagets and the whole nasty lot of them! They might amuse themselves in their own way for me, if they would only let my Éclair alone. God help her, my pretty little queen! There are dark December days, I fear, coming quickly for her. I will stand by her, however, and dare take my oath on it she can trust to Percy, too."

At three o'clock Everett was at Curzon Street again. There had been no further news, but Clare was packed and ready, and the carriage to take them to the station stood waiting at the door.

She looked still more tired and anxious than she had done in the morning, for she had had much writing to do—a long letter of anxious sympathy and concern to Marion; a few lines of sad intelligence to Lady Arnleigh; and perhaps an answer that had cost her some perplexity and consideration, to that epistle from Paris as well. And she looked very tired, and stepped

slowly into the carriage with a languid and dejected air.

They drove swiftly to the Great Western Station—Fanlie and Everett, and all Clare's small etceteras of travel, in the carriage; John following, or to follow immediately, with the heavier luggage in a cab. As they reached the station, Everett sprang instantly to the ground.

"I fancy we have only just caught the train," he said. "Shall I take the tickets, Éclair?"

"Why should you have the trouble?" she answered. "Where is John? he always takes them; he is quite accustomed to travelling in charge of Fanlie and me. Where is he?" And she paused and looked hurriedly round for the cab,—supposed to be following them,—as she paused at the station door.

The carriage drew up and waited a little on one side. Mademoiselle Fanlie busied herself in getting all her packages about her. They were numerous and remarkable, as usual, and could not possibly be carried until John made his appearance to convey them and her to the railway carriage, and to find her a place. They all waited.

"We have not five minutes," exclaimed Everett.

"What can have kept him? Did he not know the way? Has he gone to the wrong station? No! Halloa! that is all right, by Jove! We will just do it. Here he is!"

And the four-wheeled cab, high-laden with luggage, turned dexterously into the court-yard of the huge station as he spoke. John sat on the box, as they had expected of him. He was clad in his long livery coat, as usual, carefully gloved and cravated, ready for winter travel; and he looked grave as he drove up to the station, for something had delayed him. He held a large yellow envelope in his hand.

"Here you are, John! Look alive!" shouted Hardy.

"Halloa!" he continued, as the man sprang to the ground, "what has kept you? What have you there?"

"A telegram, please sir," said the servant, touching his hat, and throwing a hasty, anxious glance into Everett's face. "A telegram for Miss Clare, sir. It was that kept me back for a moment. Arrived just as I was coming away."

"A telegram!" Clare caught it from his hand before Everett could intercept it. "For me?" She tore open the thin, yellow envelope, and the pink paper, with its swift-winged message, was in another instant

open in her trembling hands. They stood breathless and watched her. One glance was enough.

"Oh, Everett!" she cried, with a low, passionate wail. "Oh, Everett! my father, my poor father!"

But she could utter no more. The light faded swiftly from her eyes; her cheek paled to the whiteness of the drifting snow. She glanced once upwards, with a piteous, stricken gaze, into Everett's anxious, eager face, and then the paper fell from her hand. She seemed quietly and slowly to droop forward, as if she would sink upon the cold pavement upon her face. But Everett's arms were instantly round her, and her head sank upon his shoulder as she fainted dead away. He glanced once with grave, sorrowful eyes at the telegram.

"And so that is the end of it," he said. "Poor child! I will carry her to the carriage, John. She will soon come round again. But there is no use in going down to Quentin now."

CHAPTER VII.

Verner's Chance.

VERNER had been in Paris for a fortnight. He had been obliged to go. Mrs. Raymond Paget's little pressing notes were no longer to be resisted. He had promised her a fortnight in November, and he had felt obliged to obey. Besides, it had suited him pretty well to go just then. He had been hanging about Clare's neighbourhood again, at several county-house visits during October, and in London for the first week she was there; and he had not yet made up his mind about anything, so he felt it safest for him to go.

He always found that that peculiar friendship which he had managed to establish with Clare was best maintained by short separations, by unexpected leaving, and by quick returns; and he wished to maintain it just quietly as it was until the result of affairs had declared themselves, and until it was clearly known who would have the inheritance of the Moray-Erskines of the Glen,—whether the colonel's impatient creditors

or her! He understood now better how things stood, and perceived undoubtedly, from all he had gathered in the Highlands, that it behoved him to watch and wait. So he had waited, keeping that subtle, close hold he had acquired upon Clare—upon her thoughts, and upon her fancy, if not, indeed, upon her heart. He managed to interest and to worry her, to excite her feelings towards himself, and to leave her constantly in a state of bewilderment and dismay; to keep alive in her heart that curious longing for his presence, that inexplicable sense of pleasure she always experienced when she saw him return, and that wistful thrill of pain with which she always saw him leave her —with his eager insinuations still unexplained.

He had left her thus to go to Paris, where Mrs. Raymond Paget had a charming little *étage* in the Rue St. Jean. And he had written to her from there, saying how much he missed her, his sweet, bright friend; and how dull the bright Paris days seemed to be to him without his daily visit to the house in Curzon Street; and how little heart he had to enjoy anything that kept him from London just now. London, in November fogs, he remarked, was to him just then a Paradise brighter and more attractive than the

fairest spot of Europe to which he might journey "beneath the blue *céleste* and the radiant sunshine of a foreign sky." So he was coming back to London, he said, directly. Should he find his sweet friend there?

He missed the answer to that letter somehow; or, as he was staying with Mrs. Raymond Paget, some mishap may have overtaken it, perhaps through her servants, or some other intercepting agent, on its way from the *facteur's* square box to his room. Mischance may easily befall a letter! Certainly that one never reached his hands. So it happened that it was not until some days after that interrupted journey of poor Clare to Quentin, that Verner (as he and Mrs. Raymond waited for the first course of their dinner one night at the Café Anglais) idly scanned the English paper, and read there an announcement which caused him to start violently and utter loud exclamations of surprise.

"'On the 10th inst., at Quentin Court, Monmouthshire, suddenly, Brevet-Colonel George Moray-Erskine, late of the Carbineers, in the seventy-first year of his age.' By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Five days ago!"

And without one more word of explanation, he

sprang from his chair, turned his back upon the little dinner-table,—hastily seized hold of his coat and hat again, and simultaneously drew out his watch.

"What *is* the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Raymond, in profound amazement and consternation.

"By Jove!" he repeated. "It is half-past seven o'clock. I can catch the mail, but there is not a minute to lose. Dinner! oh, never mind, I will get something at the station."

"But what is the matter? Is there bad news, my dear friend? Have you taken leave of your senses?" she exclaimed.

"Bad news!" he almost shouted. "Why, it is the very best news conceivable. The very best thing I could hear or read. Old Erskine dead! Poor old chap! And gone off so suddenly too, down at Hartopp's, there, with no fuss about it, and no trouble to any one."

"Colonel Erskine? Verner! old Colonel Erskine dead?" and Mrs. Raymond seized hold of the paper, and while Verner hurried into his great coat, she read the announcement for herself. "Well!"

"Well, I am off," he repeated. "Oh, hang it, Violet, don't bother a fellow beyond all limits of en-

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durance," he exclaimed, as he saw signs of pathetic remonstrance gathering in Mrs. Raymond's dark eyes.

"Why, he owed me heaps and heaps of money, and, don't you see, I must be off at once to put in my claim with the first, otherwise I will not see a shilling, not a farthing of it, by Jove!"

"I may believe as much of that as I like," said Mrs. Raymond Paget, with pouting lip and tearful eye.

"Certainly, believe just what you like, my dear friend," he answered, excitedly, for the news he had had was whirling through his brain like draughts of intoxicating wine. "Believe what you like, only wish me good luck, Violet, for I am off to London at once."

He did stay to put her into the carriage, however, and sent her off, very angry and disconsolate, to join Mr. Raymond Paget over his solitary and most undomestic dinner at home; and that hesitation cost Verner that evening's train. He cursed Mrs. Raymond Paget in an emphatic style, as he had often before had good reason to apostrophize her, and he did not go back for consolation to her house.

He slept at the station that night, sending a mes-

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sage to the Rue St. Jean, however, for his servant and his things, and next morning he went off by the earliest express.

Arrived in London and driving up from the station, it struck him suddenly, just as he passed his club, that he would go in and fetch his letters; also that he would have a bit of dinner before doing anything further, for he had fared badly the night before, and he wished for a little rest and refreshment while he matured his plans. So he went in, sending on his servant to his Burlington Street rooms.

He expected to find no one in the club; for it was fine hunting weather in the country, and an empty time in town, but at the very moment he entered the large dining-room, his name was called out from the nearest table to the left of him, and he turned round, to see Charlie Keith eating a solitary repast.

"Halloa, Carr! How are you? Where have you come from, I should like to know?"

"Halloa, Charlie! Is that you? How do you do? I have just come from Paris."

"Have you? Come along, then, and give me all the *parley vous* news. Come and feed with me here, Verner. I have only just begun."

"Shall I? Very well, then, all right. Another dinner!" called Verner to the club waiter, and then he took his place opposite Keith at his little table in a snug corner apart.

"Well, this sad news about all the old Erskine lot?" said Keith. "You have been out of the way, Carr, haven't you, all the time?"

"I have, indeed. Never heard of it till last night, when I saw the announcement in the *Galignani*, and saw that it was five days old. By Jove! I was awfully sorry. Tell us all about it, Charlie. I know nothing but the simple fact—but what the paper gave."

"Well, poor George, he went toes up very suddenly, did he not? quite unexpected—game old boy, that he was! He was shooting in a turnip-field at Quentin, and Hartopp was not ten yards away from him, when down he went in a blue fit in two seconds, and he never rightly came round again. He died the next evening. Poor old fellow! I suspect he had a deal of bother all on the top of him, that nobody knew anything about; and some scoundrelly chaps had been down there at Quentin, to have a worry at him; and no one knows what came off exactly, but they shot him right ahead into the next world between them, a

good deal faster than they looked for; for, by Jove! they are nicely done now. They will never get a shilling, you know. Éclair has got every farthing of it, as safe as a bank. By gad! she is a big prize, Verner, for somebody now!" Charlie went on, as he sipped his wine and glanced with a furtive scrutiny into Major Carr's face. "You would not have thought the fine old laird would have followed his brother so soon?"

"The laird!" exclaimed Verner, putting down his knife and fork, and staring, speechless with amazement, into Charlie's cool face. "The laird! What, in Heaven's name, do you mean, Keith?" he said.

"Have you not heard? By jingo! Carr, you are 'out of it' altogether; why, the laird is dead too, man. They were twins, you know; they had a sharp run of it out of the world together, just as they had coming in, and George won in the last race, and was first by a day at the finish, though he had the bad luck to be the second, seventy years ago, at the other end."

"The laird is dead?" repeated Verner, in quite bewildered and incredulous tones.

"Yes, and a fine old boy he was. I am sorry for him, and for George, too, for the matter of that. I was down at Quentin, you know, when it happened,

but, of course, the party broke up. I stayed and helped a bit, for there were lots of things for Hartopp to do, and it lay heavy on the old 'beau' to arrange it all. But they whisked the poor colonel off up to Scotland, in no time, so we were done with him; and as there was nothing more to do, you know, and as the party broke up—well, I came up to town. I waited to see what Hardy was going to do, about going north for the two funerals,—they are to come off together on Monday, you know, at the Glen—and, besides, I wanted to hear something of poor Éclair."

"Well!" said Verner, hastily, "and what have you heard of her?"

"Oh, she is in town; they would not let her go north. She was too much cut up—too much knocked down, I mean—for the journey. Hardy has been looking after her, but he and Percy are both off to Scotland to-night. It is a rum business altogether, is it not? And now our bonnie Princess Éclair is the biggest proprietress from John o' Groat's House to the Tweed, and she has the estate, clean and clear, too, of all Old George's debts. By Jove! it was a chance, you know. I understand all about it now. If George had succeeded, he was last heir in entail, and the Jews

would have got every stiver. They say his liabilities would have sunk the estate; he would have had to sell it immediately. Only fancy it! every yard of that glorious old glen. But now, Clare has come in, and she is the last heir in entail, and it is all hers, every-thing of it, and she has not one bit of responsibility in her father's debts—not legally, you know, and of course she does not know anything about them, and nobody is likely to tell her now. But, by jingo! Carr, the Israelites are furious, and lots of other kinds of fellows, too; and they are saying beastly hard things all over the place about Old George, and taking away every shred of character or honour the poor old chap ever possessed."

"That does not much matter," said Verner, cheerfully. "The property is saved from them; and that, after all, is the point."

"Yes; but it goes against me, awfully, to hear it," said Charlie, "when you think of the poor old boy. He was not a bad fellow at any time, Verner, and the kindest-hearted old governor in his latter days that you could wish to see; and, by Jove! if I could afford to throw away a few 'thous' on sentiment, I would let those baying wolves of Israel have them, on his ac-

count, just to stop their cursed mouths a bit, and to bolster up a reputation for the memory of Old George. I would, indeed I would, just for the sake of old, jolly days."

Verner laughed a low cynical laugh, in his quiet way to himself. "Thous' are not so plentiful, I fear, as all that, Charlie," he said.

"No! worse luck to it! I need all my loose property to throw to the ravening creatures for myself," said Keith, sighing, indeed, but with a light and very indifferent sigh. "So that is the news for you, Verner, my boy—and now I must say good-night to you, for I must go and drink tea with my mamma."

"Good night," Verner answered, in an absent manner, and then, as Keith left him, he sat still for a few minutes, lost in a labyrinth of absolutely bewildering thoughts.

Then gradually his brain cleared, he saw all the facts distinctly and plain. He drew his breath with a quick, eager gesture of intense satisfaction, and his eyes glistened with almost greedy impatience, as he fixed them on the centre of the table upon the soft glowing light. "Luck!" he whispered. "By Heavens! what a stroke of inconceivable luck! *Profitez*, *profitez*

du temps! Catch the turn in the tide; strike the ready iron; do not lose a moment; seize your luck while you can trap it! Go in, and win!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Won.

With a stream of such encouraging and self-congratulating thoughts coursing through his brain, Verner rose. He glanced across at the long mirror which lined the club-room, ran his fingers caressingly through his dark hair, smiled upon himself with a soft, subtle glimmer of self-approval and assurance, and turned. Then he took his hat, passing quickly out of the swinging glass door at the entrance, and—just as he was, in travelling dress, a little pale and weary in aspect, and a little dust-stained from his journey and from all the excitement and eager hurry of the day—he sprang into the first hansom he encountered, and drove straight to Curzon Street, through the darkness and the fog of the gloomy November night.

It was not late, scarcely yet the ordinary after-dinner hour, and he felt the scheme upon which he

had at once decided was best executed with all this apparent impatience, impulse, and haste.

"Yes; Miss Erskine was in the drawing-room. She was better, and had come down stairs that day," John answered, as in sable livery (when he saw who stood there) he held wide open the street door. "Yes, she was in the drawing-room, but she had seen no one, and was in the deepest distress. Yet—he did not know, perhaps—since it was Major Carr. Should he tell her?" And John paused; he knew Verner had been a great friend, an intimate and favoured friend, in that bright little circle at Curzon Street, for a considerable time. And how much more than a friend he might be or might become in reality, John could not tell. So he paused.

"She is in the drawing-room?" repeated Verner, in an intensely sympathetic and softly inquiring tone. "And quite alone, John? Has no one come to her, to be with her, since her loss?"

"Not yet, sir; Miss Erskine, from the Glen, comes down in a day or two, as soon as it's all over there. She could not come before, you see, sir, because of the poor old gentleman, the laird. But she is coming

to our young lady immediately, for she cannot be took north in this weather, just now, and she's so uncommon down. Lady Arnleigh has been with her constant, sir, but she don't seem to want no one much."

"Just in time," thought Verner. "A little while and they will be all here again, and will carry their heiress off with them somewhere, or will try to hedge her safely in. Miss Erskine is no friend to me, nor Lady Arnleigh neither, for the matter of that. However, I am just in time to-night to run in; and, courage, my boy—faint heart never won anything yet."—"Take my card up to Miss Erskine, John," he said, quietly, "and tell her I have just called to inquire."

"I will, sir. Come in, sir. It is so wet and cold;" and Verner passed into the little hall, and the servant closed the door.

He gave the card into the man's hand; but just as John turned away, a further thought sprang quickly into Verner's fertile mind; and as the servant walked noiselessly upstairs and opened the door on the landing into Clare's little drawing-room, Verner was there close upon his track, and in the very doorway behind him as he looked into the room.

"Major Carr, please, miss," said John, and then he drew back.

There was something effective in Verner's imperative gesture when he chose to exercise it, and now, at a quick signal from him, John obeyed instinctively. He drew back, let Verner enter, and then softly closed the door.

Clare had scarcely heard him. She sat in a dim, subdued light in a deep, large chair near the fireplace, turned away from the door; her favourite dogs curled close by her feet on their Indian carpet; her long black dress sweeping far on the floor by her side. She sat very still, and it was the closing door that first roused her, for she was sunk deep in weary and sorrowful thoughts.

She moved, she turned round, and saw him. She rose quickly from her low seat, she put out her hand as if to arrest him with a gentle, deprecating gesture; her lips parted; but before she could utter one sentence, Verner had reached her side, he had caught her hand in both his own.

"My darling!" he said, in soft, breaking tones; "my own poor darling, forgive me! I have burst in upon you; I could not help it. I have travelled to

reach you night and day. Clare, my love! I cannot conceal it any longer. I must speak my heart-breaking love for you at last. I cannot repress it—I cannot be silent in my sorrow and my sympathy and my pain for you, my dearest! The deep intensity of my love for you forces a channel for its fervour and—speaks! Will you forgive me, Clare?"

He was holding her hand softly, tenderly in his as the words poured from him, and his dark, eager eyes were scanning her face. Poor little face! it might have well touched him with pity—might have filled his heart, if he had had a heart, with genuine feeling, and saved him the exertion of feigning more.

But he scarcely saw it—the sweet eyes dimmed with tears, the brave young head bowed low with sorrow, the proud lip quivering with emotions she could not restrain or conceal; all only spoke to him of the deaths, that had brought fortune, golden gifts, into a sunny future for *him*, and only recalled to him the wide glories of the old Glen, which was now hers.

And she—utterly forgot them all! and realized nothing save the sweetness of this eager sympathy with her double grief! She remembered nothing of her inheritance, of her altered position, of all the

weary days when he had played with her heart, and tortured and bewildered her. She felt only that, in the midst of all her sorrow, a strong, sweet joy was filling her wistful heart. She realized nothing save that the man she had loved, in spite of herself, so desperately and so long, was near her, filling her ears with words of sympathy that were intensely soothing and sweet, and that he was pouring out to her, at last, all the eager, passionate assurance of his devotion, which she was only too eager to hear.

"My poor darling!" he repeated again, as she stood quite silent before him, so trembling and fragile, her black robes falling heavily round her slight, bending form. "Will you forgive me, Clare?"

Her lips quivered a little, and her large, clear eyes were raised frankly and fearlessly to him.

"I have nothing to forgive," she whispered. "It is very kind of you to come;" and then her gaze meeting his, so full of eagerness, softened and suffused with such sweet responsive love, that he knew he was safe —and quite forgiven this abrupt intrusion, indeed. So he felt assured then, and, after a moment's silence, he encircled her quietly in a close embrace.

He drew her little, weary head on to his shoulder,

and he bent low, until his dark moustache brushed her fair, pure cheek.

"My own love!" he said. "May I call you so? Is it for ever, Clare, mine to support and to comfort and to cheer, after all these weary, weary days, and all my fears and my waiting and misgivings? May I call you, then, my own one, my heart's darling, my love?"

"Oh, Verner, Verner!" she whispered, in broken accents through her blinding tears. "Oh, surely, you knew it, Verner, long, long ago!"

CHAPTER IX.

Triumphant.

So the creditors were outdone and Verner Carr was triumphant; for with the full, free gift of herself and her bright, young heart and warm affection, he fully realized that Clare would lay willingly all her fortunes and possessions at his feet.

That they would be the least part of herself, in her own eyes, he well knew, and Major Carr walked proudly forward for the next fortnight, a strikingly successful man. And poor Percy, who had come up

at once from Wynton, and travelled north with Everett to pay the last honours to the memory of his two kind friends, came south again with the intention of going, with a heart full of sympathy and tenderness for her, to visit Clare, all personal trouble being forgotten for the time being as he thought of her deep distress.

But as soon as he reached town again, the first news that greeted him, repeated right and left, was her engagement—for Verner Carr had spread abroad his good fortune without a day's delay. "She might be interfered with," he thought, "feel hesitation, and recall her swift acceptance of his proposals." He felt that the more public the thing was made the better—so much the more surely was she committed to him. And everybody told Percy, every single individual he met, when he arrived in London, and he turned back sullenly from his intention, resolving that nothing would take him to see her now.

The night he arrived in town on his return from the Glen, he had dined at his club and heard the news discussed and canvassed; her inheritance calculated, and her father's character treated lightly enough, by many censorious and indifferent tongues; and, sick and weary of the whole business, he escaped from the tattle

of tongues and the atmosphere of tobacco-smoke and scandal, to Everett's little house.

He burst in upon Everett, who was passing a quiet and reposeful evening after the long journeys and fatigue they had just undergone together — burst in upon him, full of passionate indignation, full of bitterness and misery, full of anger at Verner, and of sullen disappointment with Clare.

"How could she — how could she do it so soon?" he exclaimed, throwing himself into one of the huge arm-chairs that flanked Everett's fireplace. "It is sickening, Hardy, to hear them all down at the club there, going on! She made it up with him, I tell you, before her father or her uncle were in their graves; and he has gone and blazed the whole thing abroad in London, and they are talking of nothing else at the club!"

"I suppose he thought it was something worth telling," said Everett, ironically, taking his long pipe from his mouth to emit a cloud of the fragrant smoke of his Turkish tobacco from between his lips. "Have a cigar, Percy, and sit down and be quiet, old chap."

For Percy had sprung up again as Hardy spoke,

and was looking angrily and very excitedly into the fire.

"Sit down; here are some capital Havannahs." And Everett extended a well-replenished case to him, and lit a long match at the burning coals, as if he saw Percy badly required the soothing panacea as well as some tranquil repose.

"I feel mad about it all," said the poor fellow, gloomily. "It is not the engagement altogether, God knows. I had expected it, and was making up my mind to that; but, Hardy, I did not think she could do it in this way. I never thought she would let her name and Verner Carr's together, go blazing about the clubs before poor old George's wolves had done baying at him and abusing him, all over the place. If she had waited, you know, and spoken to people who knew and cared a little about it; or who thought of her father's memory or his honour the least bit in the world, one might have advised her to do a thing or two; but now, of course, it is all Carr's affair, and poor old George's pecuniary reputation will not be a matter of much concern with him; and yet, by Jove, Hardy, it was a bad business—things are left in a very fishy state."

"I suppose the debts were enormous?"

"Quite enormous," said Bligh. "He meant to sell the property, as I always knew, the very minute he came into it (if he ever did); and so all these fellows waited on upon his word. And they always looked to it, you know—that if *he* had died first, the old laird would have done something, for many a time before now he has seen his brother well white-washed, and squared up; the honour debts, at all events. But now, they will keep it all away from Clare's knowledge, and Baynton and Sudleigh and Whitman will be all out of their money, besides the Jews and every one else. Of course, it is all right, legally speaking, you know, and Carr will take care that nothing but the legal obligations are met. But I would not have believed it of her, Hardy, that within a week of his death she would have thrown George's name, and honour, and interests, and everything, overboard, and every one of us, you know, along with him as well, and given it all into the hands of Carr. He goes talking and swaggering about it all over the place, and using the possessive pronoun freely about everything that belongs to Clare."

"I am afraid it is all natural enough, old boy," said

Hardy, consolingly. "She would have had to choose a husband one of these days, you know, Percy, and could not have gone on leaning for advice and direction upon you and me. And the husband would have closed his fingers round the property, whoever he might have been, without thinking much of poor George."

"Every fellow would not," said Percy, in a resolute tone, and he threw himself back in his smoking chair with a great sigh.

"I dare say not," said Everett, quietly. "But the most of them would, I expect."

"Oh, hang it all!" continued Percy, "and now it is done—for the old yachting days, and the drag, and the Glen, and everything. The old set smashed up for good. Well, where can I go off to now, I should like to know, Everett? for I must get out of the sight and the hearing of the whole thing again, or I shall be murdering Carr one of these days, before I know what I am about."

"Don't be an ass, old boy," said Everett. "I would advise you to stay where you are for the present, or, that is to say, go back to Wynton and hunt."

Percy broke into a bitter laugh.

"I *am* an ass," he said. "Don't let us talk of it any more; he is a horrid fellow, and she will find it out one of these days; and meanwhile, Hardy, if she likes him, what is that to me? By George, I will *not* think any more of it; I will go off again to Hampshire. Wynton has got a good mount or two there, well up to my weight, so there is an end of it all. Do not let us talk of it again."

He gazed into the fire silently for a few minutes, and then, in a changed tone, he said—

"Wynton is going to ride in the Hampshire races. I will go down and look at him, and back his Aurora."

"Is he as fond of 'jockeying' as ever?" asked Everett, glad to follow Percy's lead immediately, in his effort to turn their thoughts and their conversation to other themes.

"Quite; it is the only thing he cares a bit about," said Percy, "the only thing he thinks of as far as I can see."

"He is very successful, too?" said Hardy.

"Oh, marvellously; it is enough for him to mount a filly, her first race, to give her luck for the rest of

her days. He is as light as I am heavy, you see; but he is awfully good-natured in giving me mounts. I will hunt with him all this winter—that's just what I will do."

There was not anything else to be done for poor Percy; he went off to prepare for his winter hunting, and Everett settled down in his little London studio for a bit of winter's work. He meant to go abroad after the year turned, but he had some unfinished pictures to occupy him for the intervening weeks.

His large view of the Glen stood finished on the easel before him, and he often looked reflectively at it; remembering pleasant days during its creation, thinking of the studio tent on the hill-side; of the bright girl who came so often to visit and refresh him with baskets of fruit, or some bit of dainty luncheon, and still more with her bright companionship and sweet, radiant smile. And he laughed a little sadly to himself, as he remembered that the second picture had never been achieved up there, because of his starting off at her eager bidding in search of Percy, on that August day.

At length he resolved that he would make a copy of this one; that he would keep the original, with all its soft reminiscences and tender associations, to himself, and give her the copy as a wedding present, when the day came, by-and-by. But meanwhile, of course, there was nothing settled.

Everett had gone to see her upon his return from Scotland, and she had received him as ever, with the gentle signs of her friendship and regard. And she had dropped soft, quiet tears, as he talked to her, and as his presence recalled many things and brought back vividly the impression of that terrible sudden blow at the railway station, when she had read her telegram, and fallen fainting into his arms. But (though, as he said, it might be fancy) she seemed changed to him already, even at that first visit. Yes, even then—across the sunlight of their old pleasant intercourse, fell ever the dark, chilling shadow of Verner Carr. He never mentioned Verner, nor did she. But he felt instinctively, she was no more their Éclair, no longer the sunny girl (to guard, and cherish, and care for, with delicate tenderness) who had been their pride and their delight through wandering, bright, restless days. She was theirs no longer—she belonged now to Verner

Carr, and his shadow fell silently across the old sunlit pathway, between her and her faithful friend. So, after once or twice, he went no more to see her, but stayed at home in his studio; and worked away with quiet industry; and sighed for old never-to-be-forgotten days; and thought of the pretty dancing yacht, and the purple moors, and of Old George, with his blithe spirit and cheery voice; and of many things and scenes that would return no more.

CHAPTER X.

"Fiancée."

NOTHING was settled just then, of course, about the marriage. Miss Erskine came down to be with Clare, and she cared for her and tended her through those days, with little reference to business matters — to money, property, or to the future destination of affairs. For Clare was much worn and enfeebled just then, by the violence and suddenness with which all these changes had swept over the horizon of her life. And for several weeks she spoke of nothing to Marion, but of the two dear ones whom they had lost; and uttered

nothing at all to Verner, save murmured answers to the reiterated expressions of his love and admiration of herself. She liked to see him, and let him be with her, but no reference ever passed between them, for these first weeks, to the estates that had become hers, or to that event in the future which was to bestow them on him.

She never looked at a newspaper at that time; she heard no remarks; and, so, the great inheritance of the Erskines passed quietly to her, she scarcely realizing it at all. And the angry and disappointed creditors of poor old George Erskine, cast shame and obloquy upon his name and his memory, while she was all unconscious of what was passing and being said around her, or of any part that might be hers to enact.

A curious time in Clare's mental history was passed through just then—and it was a curious condition of half-conscious and dreary weariness into which she had sunk.

"How could she take him so easily, as soon as she came into her inheritance, when he had hung back so long until assured that the whole property would be really hers?"

So said many people who had observed the workings of Verner's complex projects. So thought even Everett and Marion. So growled Percy in angry chagrin and disgust.

And she? She had taken him because she quite forgot the inheritance; because she loved him; and because suspicion had no place in her composition at all.

And now she had him—constantly present with her. Now his soft caressing manner was ever ready to soothe and console her; and his musical, harmonious voice daily dropped its sweet sympathy and tender expressions into her ear;—she remained still unsuspicious, although not always quite satisfied and content.

She would have found it difficult to describe her feelings.

She had in his professed devotion *all* that she had once thought life could give to her, or that she could ever desire.

And she had him continually near her—speaking ceaselessly that intense devotion, with repeated and ever-ready expression, as if the theme could never tire.

And yet, to Clare, for whom life, through all her full and happy youth, had contained so much in

thought, in experience, in variety of tastes, and affection, and ideas—there came something that disappointed her immediately, even in the first sweet intercourse which their engagement implied.

Not that he seemed to lack in love for her—*that* came pouring in a rippling stream from his dexterous lips incessantly. But there came nothing more.

They found no fresh field to meet upon, now that the old terms of distant coquetting with their unuttered sentiments had been swept away.

And through the days in which she mingled tears of deepest sorrow with these smiles of tender joy, Clare had so many feelings, so many, many strange and puzzling things to think and to say, for which Verner had no answer at all to make to her, and from which he always turned restlessly away.

A fortnight's engagement passed on between them, and nothing had been said of plans, prospects, position, or inheritance.

At length, one dark afternoon in December, Clare was sitting quietly with Marion, awaiting the arrival of Verner. He would come, she knew, and sit whispering his soft love words in the firelight until the dinner-hour. And this evening she seemed, for the first time,

to rouse herself from the sort of trance of exhaustion with which her whole faculties had been overpowered. Quite suddenly she said—

"Marion, how strange it seems! I cannot see clearly, even now, into all the altered conditions of my life; and you, Marion, dear Marion, how good it is of you to be with me! How patient you have been with me all these days! And how selfish and dull in all my powers of realization, I seem! Do you know, I have to rouse myself often, when I see your dear face over there before me, to ask myself what has happened?—where father is?—why Verner is coming this evening?—and why you are not with uncle Lairdie at the Glen? I do not seem to have any power of realizing it, Marion, at all."

"It will come, dear," Marion said. "It has all been so very sudden for you—a shock often tells like that. Realization will come gradually to you, Clare. A great deal, indeed, has come and gone."

"But do you realize it, Marion?"

"My dear, I had realized it so often long before it came."

"Did you think uncle Lairdie would die?"

"I thought him failing many a day. Yes, I saw it

coming, very quietly, but very surely, too. It is the way of the Erskines, you see, Clare, to hold on bravely with their head held high, till the very end. They all go suddenly, my dear."

"Oh, Marion, it was *so* sudden. Oh, if I had only thought that day when he went to Quentin, that I was never, never to see father again!"

"These things are kept mercifully from us," Marion answered. "It would not do to look too clearly forward in this changeful life of ours."

"I cannot look forward," continued Clare, dreamily; "I cannot see before me one single yard. I only feel so tired, Marion, as if things happening so sudden were too quick for one to bear. I only want to rest, and to think of nothing, and to wish for nothing," she added, in a low tone, "now I know that Verner really thinks for me."

"That was very sudden, too, my dear," said Marion, dryly. She had dreaded any interference, by word or look, with Clare in her exhausted state just then; but she had been dismayed beyond expression when she came down from Scotland to find the rapid climax which had arrived between her and Verner Carr. And Marion was waiting, quietly feeling that at present,

while nothing was settled, nothing could or need be said. But now the opening was given her. "That was very sudden," she murmured, in a low, grave tone.

"Oh, no, Marion; you know I always liked him—I mean, since last year—ever since I have known him at all."

"Do you know him at all now, dear?" said her cousin. "I think that is still the question."

"Oh, Marion, do not—do not speak against him! Indeed—indeed, I cannot bear it!" Clare exclaimed.

"I will not speak against him; I will leave *you* quietly to judge. Only, Clare, take time to judge, dear. Do not hurry too fast over matters beyond—well, beyond that turning from which you cannot come back."

"Oh, I never think of going back, nor of going forward, either, at present. It is so very sweet and restful just to leave things as they are!"

"And that is all *I* wish for the present," said Marion. "Only, do not let him persuade you into being precipitate, Clare."

"He never persuades me to anything; he is only so kind and so sympathetic to me all these dark, weary

days; and it is so comforting to have him, and it is so good of him, Marion, too. I am so dull and sad with him, and he never seems to think of anything but just consoling me."

"Clare, dear," said Marion, after a few minutes in which they had both sat silent and thoughtful in the quiet, dusky light, "do you ever think in these days of the Glen?"

"Yes, yes, I do, Marion, and of papa and uncle Lairdie lying lonely there, and of the old walks, and the wood paths where uncle Lairdie used to walk so often, and to work with his long rake and hoe—do you remember, on the summer evenings, when I was a little thing, long, long ago? Yes, yes! I often think of it. How I do love the Glen!"

"Do you ever think, Clare, of your own position now in regard to it? Do you realize to whom it all now belongs?"

"To whom it belongs? No, I forget. What was it? What did uncle Lairdie use to say to me? Oh, Marion, I had quite, quite forgotten! I only thought of father and of him. But—yes, yes! I remember now. Oh, do not make me take it! Oh, Marion, the old Glen must belong to you!"

"No, my love," said Marion, quietly, "I have my portion, but all the rest is yours."

"Mine?" said Clare, dreamily. "Mine?—the dear, dear Glen, with its beautiful mountains, and the grand, wild river, and the glorious, beloved falls, and the little children on the braes up among the rocks, and the corries, whom I was so fond of in the dear old days, and the people, and the loch, and the wide, waving fields of grass and corn! Oh, how it all comes back to me, now we speak of it! How I love it!—how I love it all! But it cannot belong to me, Marion—not to a girl, a young, foolish thing like me? Oh, do you take it all—do *you* keep it, Marion, and let me come and stay with you there!"

"You would not be alone, Clare, you see," said Marion, quietly, "even if in other respects that arrangement would suit."

"Ah! I quite forgot that," said the girl, with a sudden blush; and she sat upwards in her deep chair, and leant forward to gaze into the dancing light of the glowing fire. "I forgot that; indeed, how I seem to have forgotten everything since the day I went to the station with Everett Hardy, and since the night Verner came so suddenly to me! But I remember it all now;

and oh, Marion, how strange it is!—the darling Glen, the dear, lovely old Highlands, where life always seemed so happy, and of which the memory is so bright! I am very glad it is mine, Marion, since you will not have it, because then we can all live there together, you see—you and everybody else I love. Oh, if only father and uncle Lairdie were still to be there!"

"If they were!" said Marion, sighing. "But, my dear, do you know you must rouse your mind shortly, to think of this and of many other things? You will be of age in a short time, and then there are many duties and vast responsibilities, my Clare, that will become yours."

"Oh, Marion, Marion! you must do all these for me, just as you used to do."

"My dear, you will not be alone, as I said before; if you carry out your present projects, your affairs will pass quickly out of my control."

"But I have no projects," said Clare.

"Perhaps not, my love; but you must rouse yourself before long, and form some, in one direction or in another, as the case may be. You must get back your thinking powers, my Clare, and all the keen good sense with which, thanks be to Providence, you are

well endowed, and you must come to apprehend rightly the position in which you stand."

"Oh, Marion, it seems all very perplexing! Tell me who is at the Glen now?"

"Only Mr. Sandon, the manager, my dear. I have heard frequently from him; indeed, every day since I have come south; and he is settling many things. But before long, both he and I will require some co-operation from you. I could not disturb you before—but soon now I hope you will be able to think and realize. The Glen is yours, indeed, dear—the old, beautiful house and home of our fathers, and the glory of our family name since Highland history began. And it will behove you to think deeply, Clare, on *all* the position implies for you; to think well before you bestow again the trust that is bestowed on you. It is yours to hold, yours to give, and yours to keep safe and secure for your own generation, and to pass forward to those who may come after you, still bearing the family name. And you must realize, dear, that that name also is in your keeping now—that it is yours to shield from dishonour, yours to keep unstained and pure. For *you* are the head of the Moray-Erskines

now, my little Clare, and the whole honour of the family, remember, will rise or will fall with you."

"Oh, Marion, these are terrible things to think about! How can I get strength and courage to understand and to undertake all this? You must help me, you must advice me, if you think me wrong."

"I will advise you, my love, when my own mind is made up as to what I think your duty. And, at all events, I will advise you before I see you take any decisive steps. I have other things to tell you of in the matter; but I will not tire you with further talking on the subject now."

Clare was tired, indeed, after that, and sat still in her deep chair for some time, with her eyes closed,—all the purport of Marion's communication beginning to form itself in clear ideas and in full understanding of the revelation within her brain.

And then the picture of the Glen came floating before her mind—painted in clear, strong, beautiful colourings. And her heart answered back, in throbs of deep, passionate love, as she remembered the hills and the woody braes of her ancestral home. The beloved country, the fresh, wild moorlands, the deep, woodland glades, the nooks and pathways and shady

corners by the river side—how intensely she had loved it all, her whole life through!

How thrilling was the thought of this deep trust and responsibility vested in her now from her uncle Lairdie, who had so loved his Glen; and from every Erskine who had been before them,—in generations and generations long ago! How proudly her heart throbbed, as the hot tears rushed to the fringe of her drooping eyelids, and rested in bright, pearl drops upon her cheek! How proudly her heart throbbed, for she was the bearer, as she knew well, of a grand old name,—the centre of a race and family, in whom honour and bravery and love of home and country had lived side by side!

All was hers now, to guard and adorn, and keep honourable in the eyes of the entire world. How should she do it, she thought, a young, fragile thing like her?

Her mind had wandered then to her own father,—"the dear old bright-hearted, cheery-faced father,"—who had carried the family name, too, and had been proud of it, and had made it at least well-known and beloved. And her tears dropped again as she thought of him. Her dear old father, how eloquently he would

have lectured were he there now, on the grandeur and responsibility of being the chief of the name!

So strong and intense were her thoughts and feelings about it all, that she had forgotten Verner Carr for the moment, as well as the part in it which she was tacitly intending all the time for him. And he was further from her thoughts than he had been for many a day, when he opened the door quietly at the moment, and entered the room. He came in with the composure of one who was at home there, and who simply assumed and took possession of his acknowledged place. And Miss Erskine rose and turned to greet him, and Clare raised her half-closed eyelids, and looked up with a sweet, dreamy smile.

Miss Erskine, with her fine presence and tall, erect figure, and long sweeping robes, stood still, with grave and stately dignity, before the fire. She gave her hand to him as he approached her, with some restraint and hesitation, as if she only did it as a thing which she was obliged to do.

Verner bent over the hand gracefully, and then stood upright and waited, as the lady did not sit down again.

Clare held out to him her left hand after an in-

stant, and he took it with a caressing gesture and then bent his head again and touched it softly with his lips.

"Carissima," he began in a low murmur and then continuing in Italian; "how is it with you to-day?"

"Oh, Verner, I am so tired," she said, and she let her little clinging fingers rest for a moment in the clasp of his.

"We have been talking a little business," said Miss Erskine, dryly; "and it has been perhaps just rather too much for Clare."

"Why should she be troubled with such things?" said Verner, soothingly. "Can I not be of any assistance, if there are matters of business? May I not offer my services, Miss Erskine? Will you not use me for the present, and leave this tired little bird in peace?"

"Thank you, Major Carr," said Marion coldly, "but these are matters of family business, as it happens, to which, I think, Clare must shortly find courage to attend herself."

"Excuse me," he answered, bowing a little stiffly in response to Miss Erskine's cold repulsion of his proposed intrusion; "But I would venture to insinuate

that whatever troubles threaten Clare's tranquillity in the future may be shifted with advantage on to my shoulders; if unworthy, they are willing, at least."

Clare's soft fingers twined themselves caressingly around his as he spoke, and she pressed his hand quietly, and drew him towards a low seat by her side.

"I think Clare has had enough business for one day's thoughts to work upon," said Miss Erskine. "So I will leave you without further discussion now." And Marion went off to her own apartments, for, in point of fact, her patience and composure were not equal at that particular juncture to prolonged conversations with Major Verner Carr.

"I *must* tell her," she said, "when she is a little stronger again, I must tell her everything, for the name of the Moray-Erskines must not lie draggled in the mire. I can trust her spirit and honour, that I well know. And I will sift you, then, my fine musketeering-looking major, with your sleepy, almond eyes, and long, drooping moustache;—you hero of romance, that you are, just the one to take a girl's young fancy! We will sift you and see if you are chaff or wheat."

CHAPTER XI.

Her Inheritance.

VERNER sat down by Clare, as she drew him gently towards her. He sat down on a low seat by the corner of her large, deep chair, and in the soft, glimmering firelight. Again he raised her hand caressingly to his lips, and bent down his head, too, to gaze into the dim, subdued lustre of her eyes—all tired and tearful as they looked, under their long, sweeping lashes, and heavy, drooping lids.

"Well! and does my love feel any cheerier, less sad and sorrowful to-day?"

"I am a poor sort of person to be engaged to, Verner," said Clare in answer, looking tenderly at him, with a smile like the rift of sunlight in a wintry cloud. "I am but a dull companion for you, poor fellow, all these dark afternoons."

"My own beloved!" he exclaimed passionately. "How can you utter such little foolish words? It is thick as night outside, and the fog shrouds the town

in a gloom like the lowest Inferno, but I find the sunshine of a summer in Paradise in here."

"Do you? You are easily pleased Verner; you are very good. I know I have been selfish and dull, but I am awake to-day, somehow, and I feel I must thank you for all your patience with me through these sad days."

"My own love," he repeated, and for further answer he caressed again with his false lips her soft, clinging hand.

He found it difficult to make any other response for, indeed, in very truth these dark afternoons in Curzon Street had been a dull business for him. For he was not in love with Clare, and her persistent grief was a terrible bore to him. Her dull, sad, and irresponsive ways throughout these days annoyed him more than he could say. But then his inward thoughts supported him, and his sense of victory and of sure future success overwhelmed his weariness and gave him stimulus to go on.

By-and-by, he might "drop through" all this, and matrimony once achieved, might be taken coolly, however ardent and unfaltering the pretended love-making must ever be. But it was hard work, he found, and

the days would have been dull indeed, if Mrs. Raymond Paget had not been in town just then, as well as Clare! The oppression of these sad and subdued evenings in Curzon Street was often brushed off by stormy scenes, at once pleasant, exciting, and altogether bracing and invigorating, over a *petit souper* in Hill Street, long after Clare had gone to bed.

This afternoon, Mrs. Raymond Paget had been so good to him, so forgiving, so accommodating, so understanding and sympathetic in every way, that it had cost him a sharp effort to leave her cosy boudoir, and to betake himself to what had so quickly become the path of duty, by Clare's side. But his words were ready, as usual, this afternoon, and came, deftly chosen, and quickly reiterated, with a studied effect of impulse, and with oft-repeated caress.

"Do you know, Verner," Clare said at length to him, after some time had passed almost in silence on her side, and in murmured endearments from his; "do you know Verner, that the dear, dear old Glen belongs to me now?"

He started irrepressibly. There was something so intensely childlike and naïve, in the simple, direct way she put the questioning remark.

"I think I have heard some sort of rumour of it," he said.

"Fancy, dear uncle Lairdie's Glen, and the old house, and all the pretty corners, and nooks, and places he loved so well; and the glorious sweeping hills, and the rushing river! Oh, Verner! only fancy it all!"

Verner had fancied it many and many a time, and the picture of himself as lord and master of it had, indeed, pleased and fascinated his fancy for this many a day. But he only said in tender tones, in answer to her, "Well, I hope it may add greatly to your future happiness, my love."

"Oh, but I am so unworthy; how am I to do what is right, and all that uncle Lairdie would have done by it? Oh, Verner, Verner! think of the dear, dear Glen."

"Perhaps *I* can sometimes help you," he said gently, for he had long ago discovered that it was best to answer her frank, childlike expressions with a simplicity as direct as her own.

For one moment she did not understand him, and then the recollection and the realization came suddenly over her of it all. She sat upright in her

chair. She leant forward, and laid her other hand softly and firmly upon his. She looked earnestly into his eyes as he faced the bright fire-glow, and the full sense of their projected unity, in all the interests of this wide future that opened up before her, came clearly and forcibly to her mind.

"Dear, dear Verner," she said, "how dull I have been over it all! How I forgot everything, in my grief for uncle Lairdie and father, and in the depth of my happiness that came together with my sorrow, when I found God was really, for help and comfort, going to give me *you!* How absorbed I have been in my own thoughts and feelings! Upon to this very instant, I have never clearly realized what is actually to be. But now, Verner, do you feel it with me, dear—it is all to be yours as well. It will be mine no longer; it will be mine only to lay down for you. And will you take it, Verner? Will you, indeed, take it all instead of me—instead of poor, tired, foolish me? Are you going to take me really on to your shoulder, and not only me, but all my new cares and responsibilities, in the charge of the dear Glen?"

"When you give yourself to me, Clare," he answered, in a low voice and with difficulty—for her

earnest tone and her intent way of taking and looking at things, put him out, somehow, and irritated and oppressed his conscience in some peculiar and disagreeable way—"when you give yourself to me, of course, you will give, along with yourself—everything that belongs to you," he was going to say, but he stopped and changed the sentence—"all your cares and responsibility, I hope, at all events."

"I will give you everything, Verner," she answered, with a long, soft sigh of satisfaction and rest. "How foolish I was when I thought I should have it all to bear, to forget that I should have you in the midst of it, along with me! Oh, Verner, I am so glad!"

He stood once more in answer, and swept her soft fingers with his moustache.

"Then, there is the old name," she went on—"the name of the Moray-Erskines," she said, laughing softly, with a sad intonation in the little laugh as she remembered, and felt at once touched and amused. "The old name,—about which uncle Lairdie and father used to go on so with their stories of '*Ian a Donachan* and the Speckless Shield!' We must take great care of the old name between us, must we not, Verner?—you and I?"

A sardonic smile crept over his lips, for he knew something of what the poor old name was enduring at that very moment around them — something fortunately quite unknown to her! "It was great nonsense, all this," he thought emphatically to himself—but still, it behoved him to go on patiently humouring her still.

"If you are ever good enough to give the name to my unworthy self, my darling," he said very seriously, "I will stand between it and dishonour and shield it — shall I say poetically, like your cavaliers of old, 'With my best heart's blood?'"

"We must shield it if it is ever threatened," said Clare solemnly; "because I have heard uncle Lairdie say a thousand times, that so *he* measured honour. He had four trusts, he said, as the Chief of the Moray-Erskines: the people, the purse, the property, —but before all the name. 'To keep it unstained,' was one of his favourite sayings, 'both money and lands and the best heart's blood of its people must go.' He meant, that, of course, in the old times, when the clan used to go out often and fight and bleed for the name. Now we need not die for it, you know, at least, not in that kind of way. But we must

give everything up for it, so he used to tell me, even if the sacrifice should break one's heart entirely, and blight, perhaps for ever and ever, one's life."

CHAPTER XII.

Mrs. Raymond's Boudoir.

WHAT solemn thoughts were shadowing themselves upon Clare's young, earnest spirit! What dim, instinctive promptings had she, of what, for name and family, it might be still her fate to do, it is impossible to surmise. From that evening, however, after Marion's reminder and after her own full realization of her position with regard to her old family and home, a change came over Clare. The dull languor which had seized her, as the natural reaction of sad and unlooked-for shocks, passed away, and she roused herself, merging her bitter grief in her thoughts of duty, turning her whole heart and mind to the understanding of that trust which she had inherited from her beloved uncle, and through her dear old father, too. She seemed to acquire, from that evening, a certain sweet dignity of demeanour—a curious composure that

had something touching in it, for a childlike simplicity mingled with the quaint, earnest gravity of her words and ways.

She had been thinking deeply, indeed, during these days and weeks of her sad affliction, and earnest and eager feelings were forming themselves in deep and living fountains of strong principle and intent—all ready to spring up perennial in the actions of her future life. And that new spirit which was thus born within her seemed to impart infinite new elements of sweet womanhood to what had hitherto been the bright, unconscious character of a girl.

They were a good deal thrown away upon Major Verner Carr,—all these shades and varieties of changing and new-forming character in Clare. The whole thing bored him, indeed, not a little, and made him turn more frequently than ever to the refreshing springs of liveliness to be found in the society of his former friend.

It was some days after that talk with Marion, which had thus suddenly electrified Clare's heart and energies into renewed activity and life, that Verner, entering the drawing-room in Curzon Street for a few minutes in the afternoon, and finding that Clare and

Marion had just gone out, tossed carelessly upon the table a fresh unread number of some sporting paper—*Bell's Life in London*, the *Gazette*, or some such publication of peculiar interest to him, which he had just bought at a little news-shop at the street corner, and which he meant to carry home with him, when he called here and left again in the evening. Why he tossed it upon Clare's table was a thing he could never tell. It was a piece of carelessness for which he was ever apt to upbraid himself during his whole future life. But his mind was full at this moment of an engagement he was bound to keep with Mrs. Raymond Paget, in Hill Street, at four o'clock, and he was late.

He was annoyed, too, at having just missed Clare, who had sent a tiny note to request his presence early in the afternoon, and his combined impatience and vexation made him forgetful and negligent for that particular moment, and thus, tossing the paper half-consciously upon the table, he hurried off to Mrs. Paget and left it lying there.

Mrs. Raymond was a collector of *objets d'art*, and so was Verner Carr, at least, like her, professedly. Probably, they neither of them knew much really about

the subject, — but they had found it a ground of mutual sympathy in the early days of their flirtation, and had spent many a pleasant afternoon in hunting *bric-à-brac*, both at home and abroad.

Now, Mrs. Raymond Paget had found a blue Delft dessert service, buried in grimy obscurity in the purlieus of Hanway Yard. So she had sent off for Verner, to come and look at it with her, "if," as she had denoted with several underlines of emphasis, "if he could spare from his charming heiress one little hour, for an old affectionate friend."

And Verner had written—"I am coming; heiress is charming, certainly; but as I often before assured some other people, '*Elle n'empêche pas.*'"

"So here he comes, poor fellow!" said Mrs. Raymond, as he entered her room.

She had her bonnet on, and her little brougham was already waiting at the door, but she was still sitting cosily at her tea-table, and as Verner entered she held out a fragrant cup to him, and indicated for his acceptance a corner of the double *causeuse* by her side. He took the inviting corner, and heaved a sigh of complete contentment and sense of deep repose,

and Mrs. Paget brought her dark, soft eyes to bear upon him, while he applied his with gravity to his tea-cup and its contents.

Mrs. Raymond Paget's boudoir, the secluded temple where she received such votaries of platonic friendship as worshipped at her particular shrine, was an apartment in curious contrast to the harmony and artistic simplicity which characterized Clare Erskine's pretty rooms. Mrs. Paget's was quite a "bijou residence." So the house agents called it, when they advertised it for letting furnished, while Mrs. Raymond was abroad. It was a very repository of *bric-à-brac*, of every conceivable era, style, and school—a sort of conglomerate of Marquetrie and Chippendale, Sèvres, Delft, and Faïence, bought and gathered together quite indiscriminately, as chance had brought each article within the range of her observation and of her purse.

Her room, too, was what is called "dainty," for there had been quite a lavish expenditure in its decorations, upon lace, festooned muslins, and ribbon bows. And there was much discretion also shown, at least in one point of her furnishing, and that was the excellence and size and comfort of her chairs. Mrs. Paget gave way to no foolish artistic whims or fancy

in this detail. No gimcrack, cane-back, and gilded furniture scared the visitor when he sought a quiet resting-place, or suggested his getting up rapidly again once he sat down.

Mrs. Paget had furnished her room chiefly for visitors of one particular class, and when they once got in there safely captured, she always meant them to stay for a long time. So her chairs were large, low, and luxurious. You had to be thoroughly at home to lounge really at ease in one of them, but, once there, it was very difficult to get up again. Besides, growing "at home" in that room was an easy and simple process, if Mrs. Raymond chose to assist you herself in her soothing and pleasant way.

Verner Carr was very much "at home," at all events, and he lounged back into the depth of the luxurious sofa with singular satisfaction and content.

"Poor boy!" said Mrs. Raymond, caressingly. "He looks very tired to-day. Hard work with the heiress? Was the pretty dear in the least bit of a temper this morning?"

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "I have not seen her to-day."

"Not seen her to-day? Oh, the naughty, naughty boy! How he will be scolded!"

"He won't be anything of the kind."

"Won't he? Ah! it is an angel, is it? With the sweetest, divinest temper, of course? Why, yes, I quite forgot. It is a dear, sweet, sugary angel, with the mind of a baby, and the dearest, little, innocent, goody-goody ways! Of course, I quite forgot! The angelic darling! Oh, Verner! I always knew the kind of thing was just your line."

"You knew more than I did," he said, angrily. "It is a deuce of a bore—that is what it is, at all events."

"A bore, my DEAR Verner?" (six times underlined with astonishment.) "He finds his sweet, little, bread-and butter lady-love the least little bit of a bore, does he? What! That *is* amazing! Verner Carr, too, with his unsophisticated tastes, and his love of dear little sugar-plums, and nice little, innocent *plats* without pepper, or salt, or spice! Oh, dear me, *mon ami*, how astonishing, to be sure!"

"Lord! Violet!" he replied; "how you bully a fellow, as if I had not enough to worry me without your adding on all that!"

"To worry you, poor boy!" she murmured, compassionately.

"Well! it is not very pleasant, altogether, under the circumstances, you know, and especially," he continued, hesitatingly, leaning towards her as he spoke—"especially—I feel many things when I come to see you here."

Mrs. Paget put up her little brightly jewelled fingers for a moment and caressed his dark hair.

"Poor dear!" she said, soothingly. "Well, I am glad it has little thoughts and reminiscences sometimes!"

He looked up at her, and heaved a quick, eager sigh. Life, with all its many successes even, bored him dreadfully just then. He let her play with his hair for a moment, as he bent towards her on the low sofa, and then he possessed himself of her fingers, as he had done of Clare's only the evening previously, and raised them with a quick, passionate gesture to his lips. Somehow or other, it was strange and incomprehensible—but these platonic passages of friendship with Mrs. Raymond Paget had regained much of their old fascination for him since he had been engaged to Clare. She let him hold her hand for a

moment, and made no resistance, while he caressed it with his lips.

But presently, as if she scarcely noticed the little attention, she spoke again, and this time in clear, forcible, and very practical tones.

"Verner, you know, I think you have made a mistake," she said.

"I feel as if I had at this moment," he answered, in a low, murmuring tone.

"No, no; I do not mean that," she replied. "But, you know, Verner, you would have fared much better, in the long run, if you had really trusted to me."

"I am sure of it," he answered, dreamily, as if he were quite abstracting himself from the external and practical, and yielding slowly to the soft mesmerism of repose.

"You are sure of nothing," she said, shortly, "for you know nothing about it. But I should like you to know now—now that is all over, I mean, and that *I* have no further part to play in your life—I should like just to show you how much I had your interests at heart."

"*Carissima Viola*," he murmured, lazily again, as if giving but half-awakened attention to her words.

"Do leave my fingers alone, Verner, and don't be so silly," she exclaimed then, with half-tender, half-reproachful gaze into his dark face. "What would the pretty little golden-haired one say to her naughty truant boy, if she could see you at this moment, eh? I must put a stop, you know, *amico mio*, to all this sort of thing."

"*Et pourquoi?*" he said, coolly, and then he sat up and stretched his arm over the back of the sofa towards his hat—something very like a huge yawn escaping at the moment, as if even of this familiar and well-worn amusement of enacting sentiment with Mrs. Raymond Paget, he was for the moment fatigued.

But she was not going to let him leave her yet. "Stop! listen, Verner! Are you going? No, no, nonsense! you mustn't," she said. "You are coming to Roberts's in the brougham with me. But listen first! You know the Latour-Edwards, Verner?"

"The Latour what?" he said.

"Edwards, the Latour-Edwards. Why, I have numbers of times spoken of them to you. The girl was at school with me, a little behind me, you know, and she is coming out next season. I have been keeping them up assiduously all this time. She has a

million and a half of money, *down* on the day she marries, and Verner—I dare say you will not believe me—but I meant her to have married you!"

Mrs. Paget's assiduous friendship, as displayed that afternoon, was very striking indeed!

Verner smiled a little under his dark moustache, and kissed her finger-tips once more with careless gallantry as he rose. "*Toujours fidèle*," he said, "*Toujours charmante Viola ma chèrie, ma belle.* No! I cannot go to Roberts's to-day, I am due at Curzon Street at five o'clock."

CHAPTER XIII.

My Father's Name.

MEANWHILE, Clare had come home from her shopping with Marion, to find that Verner had missed them. She was sorry when John told her that he had been there, and she went at once upstairs to see if he had left any note.

Miss Erskine went on to her own room.

Clare turned into the drawing-room, took off her bonnet, undid the fastenings of her long black mantle,

and dropped it from her shoulders on to a chair. She then made the round of her little inkstands and tables, to search for any traces of Verner he might have left behind for her.

She found no note, but upon the top of the open book which she had been reading—lying upon the table next her own low chair, among her work and all her little loose notes and letters, and general ladylike *débris*, and untidiness, that will collect on the table and in the work-basket that is always used—she saw the newspaper he had tossed there so carelessly, and she recognized it immediately as belonging to him. Chiefly because it was his, she took up the *Sporting Gazette* idly, and half-unconscious of what she was doing, she unfolded it as she sat down in her chair.

John had just placed her bright reading-lamp beside her on the small table, and she turned the pages of the paper towards the light, thinking all the while, as her eyes scanned absently the close-printed columns, how sorry she was to have missed Verner, and wondering at what hour of the evening he would return to her.

Suddenly her gaze was arrested; her attention recalled, from its idle pleasant wandering over Verner's

visits, past, and to come, and was brought to a quick and instant halt upon a name, a paragraph—a whole long article, indeed—which she lit upon all unawares in the paper he had left in her room. The name!—it was a well-known name—and the tears started almost instantly, as it flashed out before her, in such strong, clear type:—"Old George Moray-Erskine of the Carbineers."

She looked at it tenderly for an instant, and then her eyes passed on, and the glistening tears blinding her vision cleared suddenly;—she read—and her heart seemed to stop its beating, as if seized in a cold iron grasp.

She read—vividly, forcibly, and unmistakably the close-printed rows of the newspaper carried their stinging revelations to her eyes—word after word, sentence after sentence, paragraph upon paragraph. She still read, and her heart woke up again, throbbed with sharp, painful intensity, and then, sick with horror and mortification and shame, there flamed up within her breast a burning and angry fire of indignation, and the colour rushed crimson over her cheeks and forehead. She drew her breath fast and thick.

The Moray-Erskines, the old honoured name! Did

men *dare* to take it upon their lips, and drop it from their idle pens with such epithets, with such contempt, with such hideous vituperation, with such angry and abusive language as this?

Who dared to write such things? Who lived—who had ventured to hurl such disgrace and ignominy upon the cherished memory of her beloved father, and upon the time-honoured nobility of their name? What did it mean? What had he done to deserve such epithets as these?

She rose to rush frantically to Marion, to seek explanation and comfort from her. She rose, and as, half blind with horror and emotion, she almost staggered towards the door, it opened before she could reach it, and Verner entered the room.

She looked up and saw him. His eager, astonished eyes met the dim and almost affrighted expression in hers.

"Good God!" he exclaimed; "what is the matter?"

And in another instant she had flung herself, weeping passionately, into his arms.

"Verner, Verner!" she cried to him, "what is the

meaning of this? Poor darling father! Poor dear! If he only knew it! Thank God, thank God, he cannot read or hear it! He can never know they said such things as these."

"What, in Heaven's name, is the matter?" Verner asked again, as he supported her, clinging in her convulsive agony to his shoulder, and hiding her face away from the light, from his eyes, and from her bitter shame. "What on earth is it?"

"Look, look! Or, no, *do* not look, I mean," she cried, "Do not look at it, do not read it, Verner!—this dreadful, dreadful thing they have written about him! How can they be so cruel and horrible? Oh, Verner, it has broken my heart!"

And the newspaper dropped from her hand as she hid her face again, and his eyes lit upon it as it fell upon the carpet at his feet. He saw it all.

"Damnation!" said Verner slowly and low between his fast shut teeth. And then he dropped Clare into a chair that stood near them, and he picked up the paper from the ground. He swore again to himself with furious annoyance, as his eyes scanned rapidly its contents.

"What does it mean? what does it mean, Verner?" she cried.

"Mean,—well, of course, he died in debt, you know, Clare," said Verner; "of course, everybody knows, of course, you——"

"Of course *I*, the only one who should have known, I have been unconscious of it all these long weeks and days!"

"Oh, you are such a child, Clare, there was no use talking of it to you. But it will soon blow over. It won't do to think about it. It is an annoyance, of course—most disgusting, in fact—but they will soon stop this sort of writing. You must not mind it, you know."

"Not mind it?" she answered, and her tears seemed suddenly to dry up as he spoke to her. "Not mind it, Verner? What can you mean?" she said.

"Mean? Why, of course, my love, these sort of things are a nuisance. There will be nuisances now and then, you know, my pretty one, in this beastly life of ours, but the least said about it the better. It will all blow over in a little while."

"Verner, I do not understand you the least bit in the world," she said.

"Well, my dear," he replied then a little impatiently, "I really cannot find any language more explicit than English in which to express my ideas. I am very sorry if they are not clear to you; perhaps you will take it in in a little while."

"I am taking it in, Verner," she said, "very slowly certainly, for it is very difficult, but I *am* taking it in."

She sat now still where he had placed her, on a square stiff chair, and she raised her head up straight and erect to look full at him. The tears had quite left her eyes, and she was calm and composed and cool.

"Verner," she said, "have you always known this? —all this about poor papa, I mean?"

"I? Of course, Clare. What an infant you are! Why, everybody in London knows it. My dear, don't look so tragical and grim; it is all over now, I tell you, and this sort of thing will soon shut up. It is only your luck, Clare, you were born under a golden star."

"You knew, but—of course you *meant* to tell me, Verner?"

"Indeed," he said shortly, "I don't know about that. No need to hear unpleasant things, Clare, that I can see, if they can be kept from one's hearing by some lucky means. But *this* chance is unlucky, you see, so I cannot keep it from you any more."

"But you did not really mean to keep it from me?" she went on; "not after I was strong and well again?" she said.

"Indeed, I do not know," he exclaimed, with some impatience. "I might have told you some day, but really I do not see what would have been the good."

"The good! Oh, Verner, Verner, if I did not know, how could I answer all this about poor father's name?"

He laughed a low and irrepressible laugh at this, but then instantly checked himself, and, turning towards her, he tried, with his usual caressing tenderness, to take her hand. But she drew away from him.

"It must be answered," she said, decisively, but a little absently, as far as he was concerned—more to herself than to him.

"Then do not ask me to do it," he said, laughing again, only gently this time, as he looked down upon her stern, young face. "I could venture most things for you, my sweet one, but not a passage of arms with the crack penny-a-liner of the *S. G.* No, much as I should like to do it for your sake, I do not think I could offer to answer that."

"I will not ask you to answer it," she said in a low, firm tone. "I will not ask you, Verner—for I will do so myself."

Then he laughed again a little bitterly, for he was very tired of it all. And a little impatiently, but very tenderly, and, as it would be, soothingly as well, he said—

"Ha, ha! I seem to see your little pithy sayings, the little dainty stream of fiery language, which you would hurl, in answer, into the scoundrel's teeth. No, my pretty sweet one, do not think more about it—it cannot affect you in any way, it's a nasty vulgar production. Come, I will throw it to the flames."

"Verner, stop!" she cried to him, for he really thought it would be the best plan, and he approached the fire. "Stop! stop!" she cried. "Give it back to

me; I must show it to Marion; I must read it all again and understand it every word. Do you mind, dear Verner, if I go and leave you? My brain is still in a whirl of confusion; I feel I must read it once more alone."

"Do not mind leaving me," he said in an accommodating voice. "But I would not read the beastly article again, Clare, if I were you."

"But I must," she said. "I must take it to Marion. Good-bye, Verner, perhaps you will come in the evening again."

"That I will," he answered. "And cheer up, my lovely one, do not let us be for ever in the vale of tears."

"I do not feel I want to cry now, Verner," she said simply. "Good-bye dear, I will not be so bad about it again, I think; not when you come back. But it did give me a dreadful shock to read such things about poor father, and if you had not come at the moment, I think I should have been mad with shame. Good-bye, Verner, but come back to me in the evening, dear."

After such a trying scene — at high sensational pressure, as Verner described it—it was no wonder he

felt obliged to repair for a quiet dinner and some soothing spiritual refreshment to the society of Mrs. Raymond Paget without delay.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Loved I not Honour More?"

MARION knew all about it, and had meant to tell Clare, moreover, as soon as she felt the right moment had come. It had arrived now, to her thinking, and in close and earnest concourse and cogitation the two sat long that evening before Verner returned.

There was much to tell, there was much to realize, and to understand. And there were great things to be decided, although these caused little lengthiness of discussion, for there was no hesitation or indecision, no uncertainty or delay.

But altogether a great change had passed over Clare when Verner found her alone in her little drawing-room in the evening, and as he sat down beside her, his eyes rested with sharp scrutiny and some furtive misgivings upon her face.

How grave its lines had become! How calm was

her expression! How cool and resolute was the clear, quiet light in her blue eyes! She held her head high, too, as he came near to her. She did not lounge back, with languid and weary air, as she had done always during these latter evenings. Her attitude was eager, wakeful, and alert.

"Oh, Verner!" she said. "I am so glad you have come to me! I want so much more information and advice."

"What! has my love got her busy little head full of the grave affairs of her pretty kingdom again? Little despot, is she meditating fresh laws and forfeits to impose upon her most willing slaves? Begin with me, then, my sweet one! What does your little tyrannical will dictate to-night?"

"Oh, please, Verner, do not talk nonsense to me. Let us think and discuss what can be done. Verner, do you think any one will buy it? Do you think anybody has such a great, huge sum of money to give, as that? Oh! do you think I can get it soon, immediately, before they write more dreadful things about *his* honour and his name?"

"My dear child, are you quite mad!" he said

gravely. "What, in the name of all that is divine or diabolical, are you talking about now?"

"Oh, you have not forgotten, Verner! Of course, I am talking about his debts, about my father—the debts! It is such a huge, enormous sum of money; and, oh, Verner, dear," she added, with a breaking voice and a passionate gleam of anguish in her eyes, as she looked straight and deep into his, "we shall have to sell the Glen, Verner. Just think of it—the dear, beautiful old Glen!"

"The devil you will!" exclaimed Verner, loudly; for he had been singularly unguarded in his language that day, and as he uttered the exclamation he sprang instantly to his feet.

Clare looked up at him with some amazement. "Of course we must, Verner, dear. Yes; it is terrible, is it not? But then it is worse, far worse, to have dishonour and ignominy resting upon my father's name."

"Have you quite taken leave of your senses, Clare, may I ask? Or are you talking in a dream?"

"Verner, what do you mean? Cannot you understand?" she said. "Oh, it is all quite clear to *me* now. Cousin Marion has explained to me, and I see

it all. Dear father could not pay his debts. He was always thinking that the Glen would be his, you know, and that he could give all the money he owed to the people who had the right to it then. He never thought it would come to me, you see, for he never thought of dying, poor father! No, I am sure he never did. So he never told me at all about it, or he would have known, of course, that I would have paid everything he was indebted, for him. Oh, Verner," she added, laughing low and tenderly, "it was so like poor father, to forget all about it. He never could recollect to pay anything at any time. I always did it when we went about together—Leplat and Ewen always used to come for money to me. Poor father! How odd I should have all his accounts now to make up for him—now, just as I have done many and many a day already."

Verner Carr's face had been growing very dark and pale as she was murmuring through these little, tender words, and now as she looked up at him again, she was astounded and almost frightened to see the strange, hard, and angry expression that had gathered across his lowering brows, round his close shut lips, and in his stormy, dark, kindling eyes.

"Verner," she whispered gently, and she put out her hand to him, but he turned roughly away.

He could not control himself for the moment—with rage and consternation he was quite beside himself just then. He swore again low and deeply beneath his breath, and stamped furiously upon the ground.

"Why did you open that accursed paper?" he said.

"Open the paper?" she answered. "Oh, Verner, I am so glad I know."

"But you need never have known. You need never have got all this Quixotic nonsense into your head. They will sing a requiem, I tell you, to Old George—to your poor father, I mean—in a day or two, and no one will ever think of his debts or of him any more."

"Excepting I, Verner. I am the only one, certainly, whom it can concern to think much of his troubles or his debts. But oh! if I could only have told him, if I could only have said just once to him, 'Father, you may trust me, you know!' Ah, but he did know, he knew me well enough, the old light-hearted dad! I have taken the practical things of life off his dear

shoulders many a time already, and he would know well that he might trust me now."

"Clare, are you quite mad?" repeated Verner, in angry and ironical tones again.

"Mad? Why should you say so, Verner? Do you not see it just the same as I do? Can we differ? Can there be any two sides, dear, to a question like this?"

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, and the words came breaking out in slow, emphatic sentences from between his hard, clenched teeth. "Do you mean to tell me, Clare, in your sober, waking senses, that you are speaking of an intention on your part to try and wipe off your father's debts?"

"Certainly, of an intention," she said, gently. "And not to try *only*, but to do it, Verner, too—to the last shilling that he left owing behind him, poor, thoughtless dear! I will glory in it. It will be very sweet to me to brush off these ugly epithets from the memory of his name."

"A pretty sort of glory!" he exclaimed. Then with a harsh laugh, "That will leave you, Miss Moray-Erskine, in miserable penury yourself."

She clasped her hands together and looked up at

him, and a sudden pallor fell over her fair cheek. She shivered slightly as she met his glance, and a wistful, painful wonder disturbed her blue eyes.

"Verner, I forgot," she said, "I quite forgot about your part in it all. I mean, of course, we must do it together, dear, but I do not think we shall be so very poor. We can manage without a great deal of money, can we not, after all?"

He laughed that hard, rough laugh again. How different it was, in its harsh echoes, from the dulcet softness of his usual tones to her!

"A deal poorer than I should like to be!" he said.

"Oh, Verner! if people like each other, a little poverty does not matter, surely? Do you care so very much for riches, dear?"

"I? I care for nothing. Deuce take the whole thing, Clare! I don't know what to say to you. Surely you are not going to be such a fool?"

"Verner, I really do not think we understand each other," she said, mournfully. "I do not seem to be able to make you understand, but I cannot help it, dear. I am sorry if it will displease you, but I cannot —I cannot obey you in this," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Erskine, but I have not yet acquired any right to ask you to obey me," he said, ironically. "Far be it from me, on the contrary, to stand for a moment between the shield of the Moray-Erskines and the sunlight of honour, as it is understood by them. The atmosphere is far too rarefied and ethereal for a poor, erring mortal like me."

"Dear Verner, I do not understand you," the girl repeated again.

"Well then, my sweet *fiancée*, I will refrain from all efforts to make my meaning more clear. I will leave you, and go and blow off this storm from my own brain, and leave you to cool down the Quixotic fire burning so alarmingly in yours. Good-night, beloved! Angels and brown-winged mortal spirits were never meant to fly in consort, I fear."

And so with light, bitter, and sarcastic words, he left her, for he could not trust himself to speak.

And Clare sat down again in the deep chair by her fireside, and as the night waned and the flames sank low, she sat there in silence still. For a cold, wild wave was washing over her breast, carrying many an old familiar sentiment along and away with it in its flood. And the cold wave was a sudden, surging

tide of realization, and it came swelling up and up, seeming to suffocate her quivering heart with its painful force and intensity, and it was all irrepressible. Still the revelation and the realization came. Verner Carr! Verner! Verner! the graceful, gentle troubadour of her sweet young foolish dream! What was he now to her, in her hour of bitter trouble? How did he stand as rock and shelter between her and this scathing storm of life?

CHAPTER XV.

From two Points of View.

NEXT morning, Clare received a letter from Verner Carr.

"My sweet love!" he wrote. "We seem to have parted strangely last night. As it all comes back to me now, I realize that you sent me from you without any gentle words of farewell. No soft embrace from your dainty lips lingers upon my cheek this morning, reminding me that I may go to you again. Clare, why did we part so? What evil shadow, like the

memory of bad dreams, seems to lie across the pathway between us, haunting me with grim and strange threatening effect! The shadow seems to be falling, as I remember sadly, from the substance of your own sweet words, beloved—from a dim, unpleasant sense that keeps lingering in my heart, and distresses me more than I can say. Write and tell me quickly that the wild and foolish projects you cherished yesterday have fled from your brain, and that the future still opens out before us, sunlit and bewitching as it did yesterday, sweet love!—that my fair Highland princess, my queen of wild moors and glen, still means to hold firm her sceptre and wield its gentle sway—over her grand inheritance—over her many faithful subjects—and over me—who, if the first, remains ever the humblest and most devoted of her slaves."

"Dear Verner, come to me," wrote Clare in answer. "I will be at home to receive you at eleven to-day."

So he went. Mounting once more with impatient footsteps the stairs that led up to her room; opening the door and coming in upon her, bright, graceful, as he had come so often; greeting with light compliment

and quick, tender words; sweeping away the cloud in which they had parted, as if with persistent determination that it should be remembered no more; holding her hand, gently bending over it with caressing gesture, whispering his light, eager words, and then hurrying on as if he would avoid all unpleasant reference—hurrying on to other themes, to plans, questions, projects, and suggestions, as to how they should spend the short winter day.

It was a bright day, clear, sunny, and frosty. Verner began with instant eager suggestions that they should go out and spend the passing hours together.

"You have not put on your walking things, my pretty one!" he said before she had addressed him. "I was in hopes I should find you ready for a morning turn this sunny day."

She had let him take her hand, and had left it resting in his while he rattled hastily on, but her eyes did not suffuse brightly to his tender glance. She was looking up at him very quietly, as he spoke, and as he would have hurried on again she interrupted him now.

"Oh, Verner! I am glad you have come," she said; "I have so much to say to you. Thank you for your

letter, dear; you meant it to be kind. Thank you for the love and care for me in every word. But, Verner, dear, I am sorry you wrote it, because it showed me that you do not understand me even now."

A look of anger and impatience swept rapidly over Verner's brow.

"My sweet one," he said, still in his dulcet tones, however; "do you insist in going into heroics again?"

"My dear Verner, there is no need for heroics. What I have to say to you may be simply said."

"But cannot we leave it unsaid this sunny morning? Really, I do not feel the energy for being sensational again."

"Listen one moment, dear," she continued, quietly disregarding the persistent flippancy of his tones. "I have to tell you what I have done this morning. It is my duty, I know, Verner, to tell everything about it to you. I have written to Mr. Sandon to come south at once to me, and I have directed him to gather from the London lawyers full, clear accounts of my father's debts."

"Confound it, Clare!" he exclaimed, angrily then. "Cannot you leave that worn-out subject alone? Let your father rest in peace and his debts along with

him! For God's sake, do not expect me to go into the tragics again!"

"Let me go on, Verner," she said, quietly. "I have told Mr. Sandon to do all this, and then we shall know how we stand. But Marion told me, and she is right, of course, that it will take the whole value of the Glen to make my father's memory clear."

"By God, I believe you; indeed, it will!" said Verner, gloomily. "It is a piece of Quixotic madness, I tell you, Clare. Old George was drowned, over head and ears in debt, years and years ago. It will take you 'all you know,' my sweet, romantic lady-love, to pay even the capital, let alone the compound interest of what he owed!"

"I know that," she answered, calmly. "But it must be done."

Verner heaved one great sigh of despair, vexation, impatience, and resolution all at once. He drew a little away from her for a moment, and looked gloomily at the point of his boots.

"Then, Clare," he said, in a hard, cool, but rather shamefaced way; "then, Clare, if I must take this as your final decision, I fear I have only one thing to say in reply."

"I always knew what you would reply, when you understood it really, Verner. Of course you must think really about it all, dear, quite the same as I do. You cannot see it possibly in any different light."

"I do not presume to judge for you, Clare," he answered. "The honour of the Moray-Erskines, as I said before, is a subject too sacred and ethereal for vulgar tongues. But, for my own part, I am a poor man, sweet one! If you act in a particular way, there is only one line of action open to me."

"I do not understand, Verner," she said.

He was fidgeting nervously before her, and from the depth of his craven heart, in that moment, he was wishing that he had not come for this explanation to her room; that he had written and been done with it, and not annoyed himself with this interview, so useless and so unpleasant as it threatened to be.

"I am a poor man, Clare," he repeated, "and housekeeping is very costly in these modern times."

She looked curiously at him, scanning his shovelling aspect, his bending face, his drooping eyes, and his whole dejected and crestfallen mien, and for a moment she could make nothing of him, and quite failed

to enter, in the least degree, into what was passing in his mind.

"I am a very poor man," he went on, disconsolately. "I have scarcely enough to keep a couple of hunters, or to pay my cigar bill. And, hang it, Clare," he spoke out suddenly, "don't go and sink the whole ship like this!"

"Verner, I always knew you were a poor man. I never minded that, dear," she said.

"But, oh! what can a fellow say? What a hole you have got me into! How the deuce am I to make you talk common sense to me, Clare?"

"Common sense?" she repeated slowly. "Am I being foolish and blind about anything still? Oh, it has all come so suddenly upon me, Verner! Everything has happened so quickly in my life within the last quite little while, that I do seem confused and stupid. Do say plainly, dear, what you want me to do."

"I want you to give up this insane notion of yours. Keep your own position and your own fortune,—with which Heaven has blessed you in an extraordinary way,—keep it to yourself."

"No, no, I cannot do that," she said.

"Then, for God's sake, let us end all this ridiculous talking! Make ducks and drakes of it all in your own way, for me then, but do not expect any fellow in his sound senses to run after you on such a fool's dance as this. I am too poor a man for such romantic amusement, I tell you, at all events."

"Verner, I think I understand you now," Clare said at length to him, in a low, wondering tone. "I think I understand you. Of course, I never thought what a curious difference it made in all the future of things. But I see now. Never fear, Verner!" and she put her hand firmly into his. "There—there, I give you your freedom quite completely," she said.

"I am very sorry, Clare; but, confound it! what is a man to do?"

"Look out for another heiress, surely," Clare answered, with quiet sarcasm. "That is what I would really, Verner, advise you to do." And she smiled straight up at him—a curious, proud, cold, calm smile.

"Poor fellow!" she said, "do not distress yourself. It was only my stupidity not to have realized it before."

"Oh, Clare! Clare! and I thought you cared for

me!" he exclaimed; for it cut his personal vanity to the quick that she should thus resign him so coolly, so calmly, and with that icy and brilliant smile upon her lips. "I thought you had really cared for me all this long, pleasant time."

For a moment her eyes flashed fire at him, her head reared itself proudly, and she looked with kindling contempt and anger into his face.

"Cared for you?" she said. "Did I *ever* care for you? No, Verner, it was all one long mistake."

"Confound it!" he muttered, furiously, angry beyond control or restraint, now, with himself and her. "It is all very well, Clare, but this is a commonplace, vulgar world we live in, and one has to come down to practical matters just now and then."

"So I see," she said, quite calmly still to him. "Only I never quite realized it before. Thank you, Major Carr, for all the lessons you have taught me (a good many, I dare say, from first to last), in the practical ways, as you so sensibly term them—'the practical ways of life.' And now, is there anything more to say in the matter? I think not; so I will go away if you will allow me, and leave you comfortably

and peacefully in your commonplace and vulgar world."

And then she did leave him, passing swiftly from her place, where she had stood before him, and going away out of the room, and upstairs to her own apartment, before he could arrest her, or speak again. And he remained there for a few minutes longer, looking still at the carpet with a crestfallen and shamefaced mien. And then he roused himself, and turned to the door quickly, and went furtively and very noiselessly down the stairs.

"The girl is mad," he said, with a fresh outbreak of anger, as he reached the street; "moonstruck with romance and Quixotic nonsense, and outrageous, sentimental ideas! Confound the whole disgusting business! If she sells the Glen, and pays up Old George's long-standing score, she will not have three hundred a year left with which to bless herself, and—a fellow *cannot* go and throw himself away on that!"

A few days later, the *Dover Express*, which reports with faithful detail and precision all the visitors to its pier and hotels, contained the suggestive announcement that Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Paget had passed

the night at the Lord Warden, *en route* for Italy, to spend the winter, accompanied by — Major Verner Carr!

CHAPTER XVI.

At Wynton.

PERCY BLIGH was making a poor thing of the winter. He was down at Wynton during the dark November days, and there his good-natured little brother mounted him daily to perfection; produced hunter after hunter, every one of them gloriously up to Percy's weight. And morning after morning the little slim viscount, who was like a miniature, very small boy edition of Percy's self, stood laughing in ecstacies upon his marble door-steps, while his huge, silent brother climbed solemnly on to the top of a large horse.

"My dear fellow, you are more of a mute than ever," he exclaimed one morning. "I'll be bound Sultan will do the most of the conversation as we ride to the cover to-day."

The brothers were very fond of each other. Wynton

was a bright little bee of a man, fuzzing and buzzing around all day long; breaking his collar-bone continually in steeplechase or hunting field, and hazarding his neck twenty times a day;—a cheery little, fair-faced fellow, as like Percy in miniature as anything possibly could be, and as good-natured and kind-hearted, in a small talkative and very noisy manner, as Percy was in his own big and quieter way.

"Wynton is the best fellow out," Percy often said, for the reckless, devil-may-care little man was a generous and open-handed elder brother to him; and "Percy is the very jolliest dunder-headed old beggar you could see on a summer day's ride from Beersheba to Dan," Wynton would exclaim, and make him welcome to the hospitality of his various mansions, and to all the crumbs and shavings of his twenty thousand a year, whenever Percy felt disposed to partake of the hospitalities, or was hard up enough to feel obliged to fall back upon the cash. Percy was generally pretty hard up, but he had a few hundreds a year of his own still, and managed to get on without serious trouble of that particular kind.

He had his own troubles, however, poor fellow! and they hung heavily still upon him, keeping him down

when he tried to be "jolly," and taking all the salt and sweetness out of his life.

How she kept haunting him, all these winter months!—that light agile figure in a heather tweed, who had gone bounding and dancing before him, like a ray of sunshine, flickering always across the vista of his life! How that little mischievous, derisive expression, with which she would glance up at him, and burst in upon one of his silent fits, came flashing again and again before his eyes! How incessantly through these days did all the old memories come streaming back to him, of her winsome, girlish manner, of her restless, teasing ways with him, of the dances she had led him here and there to see sights, and to climb hills, and to do a thousand things he would never have done without her, or never, never would do without her again! How she had brightened and sweetened and lit up his whole spirit and nature, and inner life! how completely she had lifted the shadow from off his shoulders! and how she had flooded with a summer glory his dull path! And now he must go on without her, and plunge once more into the dreary monotonous round of his conventional life.

Such was the state of Percy's unuttered feelings,

during these winter months he spent with his merry little brother at Wynton, before Christmas-time. And such was still the precise condition of his feelings one evening, when he came lounging down into the big divan smoking-room at Wynton, to find his brother and their knot of hunting friends in great excitement and high discussion over some news they had received.

Charlie Keith was there, and several others of his corps, and one of these it was who held an open letter in his hand, from which he was reading aloud.

"There seems to be no doubt about it," he was saying. "Old Scrivens was the colonel's lawyer, as well as mine, you see; he is a sharp fellow, Scrivens, and helped George out of many a scrape; and he had a big enough bill against the property, I warrant you, to make this communication a pretty important one to him; and his words are quite clear and unmistakable."

"Halloa, Percy," cried Wynton, as his brother entered. "Here is a prime piece of news for *you*. Long life to your Highland heiress, my boy! She is a brick of a girl, I tell you, and no mistake about it all."

"What the deuce are you talking about, Sydney?" said Percy, a little irascibly. "Cannot you shut up your chaff for once, and give a fellow a cigar?"

"Chaff, by jingo! it is not chaff a bit. You listen, old boy, it is a real good sporting piece of news. You read it out, Colman, and convince him by the way of his own sceptical ears."

"Read what?" said Percy, looking round at the young fellow, who held the open letter in his hand.

"You listen; it is an awfully good business," said Wynton; "and she is a brick, and I repeat it, no mistake. Long life to her, the pretty dear!"

"Confound your nonsense!" said Percy, angrily.

"Go ahead, Colman," shouted Wynton, from his smoking chair, and the other read aloud accordingly.

"'P. S.'" he began. "The letter is about my own affairs."

"Yes, yes, we know all that. Go ahead with the P. S."

"'The pleasantest piece of news in our world at this moment is the announcement that Miss Moray-Erskine, of the Glen, has charged herself with her father's liabilities, and means to see his name and memory cleared from all debt and reproach, even if it cost her to the full value of the estate. She must be a fine-spirited young lady, with a high sense of what is due to her family name. I fear the world will pro-

nounce her a little Quixotic, but red-tape old lawyer as I am, I feel I should like just to shake her by the hand.'"

"A high honour for Miss Erskine," cried Wynton, with a merry laugh. "Shake hands with her, by Jove! I should like to pick her up, if I could get at her, and give her a good hug, that is what I should like to do. She is a downright A 1 little heroine, she is! 'Gad, if I could face matrimony, I swear to you I would go straight off and propose to her at once; I would, I declare I would. She is a downright brick, she is!"

"Propose to her? Ha! ha!" laughed half a dozen voices.

"Too late, Wynton; she is engaged to Verner Carr."

"To Verner Carr?" exclaimed the little viscount, with a long whistle. "And what will he say to all this heroism, I should like to know?"

"I wonder!" exclaimed several voices; but, before they could speculate further, they were interrupted by Percy's sonorous voice.

"Colman," he said, and his tone was very low, as if breaking with difficulty through a storm of emotion that seemed to stifle him, and almost choked his words

—"Colman, will you show me that letter—just that last paragraph, I mean? Thank you, old fellow;" and he caught the letter as Colman tossed it over the room to him, with a meaning smile.

"Yes, yes; you may be proud of your Highland heiress, Percy, old chap," began Wynton again; but he stopped instantly, as he saw the wave of intense feeling that rushed in a deep crimson flush over Percy's forehead and cheek.

The young fellow's eyes glistened as they were turned upon his brother, after he had perused the letter again.

"God bless her!" he exclaimed. "God in heaven, bless her, the little darling! Just think of it, how those scoundrels have been writing about him! Was not your heart sore, Sydney, for all these cursed things they have been writing about poor old George? God bless her, and reward her! He will come out now with flying colours, he will."

"She is a trump, and no mistake," said Wynton, decisively; "and, by Jove, Percy, what an ass you were to leave the innings for Verner Carr!"

They sat down to their *écarté* and *baccarat* soon after that in the divan and in the pretty, luxuriously

furnished card-rooms that opened out on either side; and they sat late, playing high, excitement burning hotter as the night went on, and scarcely one of them remarked that Percy had early left them and had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII.

From Percy's Point of View.

THE morning after Clare had parted so coolly with Verner, she had, of course, broken down completely as soon as she reached her own apartment and had locked herself safely in. She had flung herself at full length across her bed, and torrents of bitter tears flowed abundantly upon her pillow; and deep, long-drawn sobs broke from her overladen heart. She wept and sorrowed for herself, and mourned her fallen idol and her rudely broken dreams—bewailed them, lying there for two miserable hours, weeping without restraint or stay. Forth she poured, with passionate energy, in a full, uncontrollable flood, all her grief, all her disappointment, all her love, and her heart's bitter pain.

Oh, how sweet it had been! How she had loved

him! How pleasant and soothing and dear to her had his smile, and soft voice, and constant presence become! And how miserably she had mistaken him! How foolishly she had dreamt that he would feel and act with her! With what vain, girlish pictures had her enthusiastic fancy consoled itself during that past night, as she contemplated the Glen, quite gone from her, and she and Verner together in romantic poverty and mutual self-support! And now he had left her, calmly deciding to desert her in the midst of it all!

She never could give much account to herself of how that morning had passed.

Miss Erskine had come several times to her door, had listened, and gone away again, feeling a shrewd suspicion of the *dénouement* which had occurred—going, because she seemed to understand the way the girl would take her trouble, and she knew she was best left alone. And Clare lay there prostrate for many hours, under the scathing storm. It was bewildering, brain-torturing, and heart-breaking all at once. There was nothing to be made of it, nothing to be said, nothing to be done—nothing but to lie and weep there, over the precious cup of happiness which she had

tasted, sipped for a few days, and now saw in shattered atoms beneath her feet. She wept quite uncontrollably; her fierce, young, passionate anguish had its full stormy way, until she could even weep no longer; until she was stunned and worn out with grief. Then it always afterwards seemed to her, that she had rested, for, she could not tell how long; lying still upon her little white bed after the passion-storm had swept away from her, exhausted with her violent weeping, her bitter thoughts, her tormenting memories, and angry pain. And as she lay and rested, a sweet composure seemed insensibly to come back again. She never knew if she had slept or not, if it had been a real or a waking dream, but there had come over her, as she lay there, a sort of sweet vision, in which she saw the past and the coming future and all the stern destinies in the vista of her life; in which her father and her uncle Lairdie seemed to stand over her, and in strong and encouraging language seemed to tell her that she was doing well; in which her own personal loss and sacrifice seemed to lose itself, in the full, inspiring sense of the duty she owed to name and descent, and to right and honour and nobility, as they lived in the tradition of her house and family for ever.

And she rose at last, feeling convinced and encouraged, feeling sad and tired, but strong.

And so she went on, for her mourning was over.

She went on through the next few days, forming her resolutions and calmly announcing them; and with her own firm hand it was that the words were written and the deed was done.

Through her own direction, Old George's accounts were gathered from creditors of every description, from far and near. By her own command, the Glen was announced in a sale list, and money was raised to meet her father's liabilities, while awaiting that the sale should be achieved. And through it all, Clare's heart stood firm, though it was aching cruelly. Through it all she carried her proud, calm front before the world.

I said, when I spoke first of my bonnie Clare, that I feared much she would not serve me for a modern heroine, and now, perhaps, she shows it in this way of hers of taking the desertion of Verner Carr.

She had wept bitterly through that first long morning like a child who had been bereft of his favourite playmate, of his life's first sweet, innocent joy; but

when her tears had been poured forth, and had washed over the wounded places of her young spirit through many bitter hours, she had dismissed them; and I doubt if she ever shed one tear for Verner Carr again. She gave way to no strange, hysterical agonies either, such as poor afflicted, heart-riven, modern heroines seem doomed to. She neither clawed the carpet nor grovelled upon the ground. She did not dash her head against the door-posts, nor did she tear her hair. But she dried her eyes, after they had wept their utmost, and when her salt, sad tears had had their own full will, and then she looked out upon the world, with her perceptions clear and bright and vivid again, and in the strong daylight of disenchantment she saw what Verner had done.

He stood revealed to her from the first day of their sweet early meetings, until the last moment, when they had parted in the drawing-room below. And though she never put it into words to any one, and not even in silent communings within her own heart did she give her realization form, yet—she knew it.

His heart, with all its scheming, its hesitations—his abruptness, and his fears—all lay unveiled before

her, and she knew now, and knew for ever, what manner of man he had been. And then she scathed her quivering young heart and cast him from her; unwinding his influence from around her life as if it had been the cold, killing embrace of a serpent's coil; drawing him forth from her heart, though she seemed to wrench and tear its delicate, bleeding fibres as she did so; and throwing him far from the horizon of her thoughts and fancies for ever. And the poor young heart ached and bled in silence—but she carried herself quiet and proudly all the while; for she was a Moray Erskine, and a child of a fine old unflinching race; and because the old blood that could never fail her, coursed hotly within her throbbing veins, and gave her this strength to do.

And it was done. The form of Verner Carr, either in shadow or substance, would cross her path, her thoughts, her fair young fancy, no more.

And this was all over, when one day her servant came up to her, as she sat lonely and thoughtful in her room, and told her that there was a visitor below. He had no card—but, he added, hesitatingly, that he

knew well the visitor, that, in fact, it was "Mr. Bligh."

And Clare started, and her thoughts travelled back —how far? Beyond the happy weeks of last autumn at the old Glen; beyond her father's and uncle's death, and her own sudden and broken engagement. Back, back, went her thoughts, to one summer day. The gleaming river danced before her eyes again, the sunset flooded ruby red across the tall-stemmed pines; and in the long grass by the water's brink, she stood, with broken line and fishing-rod, while a tall, dripping figure stood near her, a few paces away. And she heard again the passionate, broken, pleading voice. Again the faithful eyes seemed resting upon her. Again she was scanning with dismay and expostulation the flushed and clouded face. Her own now crimsoned suddenly as the recollection came.

She was changed since then, as she well knew. Ah! what a vista of life, of mingled sweetness and suffering, lay bewilderingly between! And how changed? Indeed, far more changed than she imagined. The slight form, clad in sweeping and sable raiment, with brown, soft hair coiled above a pale, quiet face, was different indeed from the laughing, light-hearted girl,

who had flitted before them all, as their "Sunbeam," their "Éclair." Their delight in yacht and hunting-box, or pleasure party—their bright sweet-hearted queen—she was changed, and more so than she knew.

"But Percy," she thought suddenly, "my good old friend!" He had come to see her, and she felt glad. She would not refuse to see him. No, "Percy, true-hearted Percy!" she would go down and receive him at once. He was allowed to come up into the violet drawing-room, which he had not for so long entered.

There he stood awaiting her, his heart sick with its violent throbbing, and his cheek crimson with expectation, and with intense, sweet, fearful joy. For he had not seen her for such a length of time. It seemed ages and countless ages to him, as his mind travelled back towards the former evenings in this room. And there he was standing—confused, and crimson with agitation, and full of infinite tenderness for her as well—when at last she came to him, opening the door and entering the room so quietly, that she was there almost before he knew.

Then, indeed, he started, for he had not realized that she would look so changed. He had never thought

of these sable mournings, nor of the soft pallor which grief and hours of weeping bring always over the freshest cheek. And the long, black, sombre dress hanging close around her slight, bending form, and the white, quiet sweetness of her altered face, so affected him, that for a moment he could not speak or look up at her at all.

"How do you do, Percy?" she said gently to him. "I am so glad to see you—it was so very kind of you to come."

And then he found voice again, and took the little hand she held out to him between both his own. He enfolded it closely, but lightly. He looked down at last, full into the small delicate face.

"Clare, Clare!" he said. "I could not help coming to you. I could not prevent myself from coming to you. I felt I must tell you, my own self, what I think of what you are going to do."

She smiled a bright, sweet smile at him, as if very pleased and satisfied with his words.

"You think I am doing right, Percy? I am so glad of it. It is helpful to have encouragement from my old friends."

"Right!" he exclaimed. "I think it is glorious!

and, oh, Clare! I am so very glad. Poor dear Old George; the dear old brick of a fellow; how maddening it was to stand by and see such indignities showered upon his name! Bless you, Clare! God bless you!" exclaimed the young fellow, warmly, while dim glistening clouds seemed to obscure his eyes. "Thank you, a thousand times, and bless you. You have saved the name of—*my* old friend."

Clare sat down as the words broke from him, for they touched her to the very depth of her heart. And to the eyes that had been so cold and clear, as they bade farewell to Verner Carr a short time ago, there rushed now, as Percy turned hastily away from her, hot, blinding tears.

Percy had turned away from her because he wished to be very calm during this interview; and had told himself before he came to her that there must be no unseemly obtrusion of sentiment on the occasion from his own side. So he turned away and remained silent a moment, while Clare strove also to restrain her swelling tears.

"Thank you, Percy," she murmured; "your words do me good."

"I could say a thousand more," he broke out

again. "But there is no occasion. One word is as good as ten. And I have said it now, Clare, and so good-bye to you; for, except for this, I would not have disturbed you now."

"But why 'good-bye,' Percy?" she said, wonderingly. "I am so very glad to see you and talk to you. Why should you go away? Will you not sit down, Percy, and let me thank you again for your kindness? And won't you give some news of yourself, and of other kind old friends?"

"Oh, you have got enough to think of, no doubt, Clare," he answered, but accepting at the same time, with shy gladness, her invitation to remain and sit down. "You are very good to ask me; but—I do not think there is any news to tell."

"What is Everett Hardy doing in these days? He has not been near me for such a long time."

"I cannot say," said Percy. "I know nothing of him; but I will go and look him up to-night."

"Give him a message from me, then," said Clare, wistfully. "Tell him not to leave me solitary in my trouble, just when I want my friends."

"Friends! By Jove, Clare, you have not forgotten

what I told you once by the river, you remember?—but I do not want to talk about it at all."

"I remember," she answered, quietly. "Yes, thank you, Percy. It is a great comfort to me to think often that I have some good, kind friends."

"By Jove!" he said, solemnly again. "If that sort of thing would help you at all——"

"It helps me a great deal," she answered. "So, Percy, will you tell Everett that I feel very lonely sometimes; missing all the old set about me; and that it would be very kind if he would recollect and come and see me, just now and then?"

"Lonely, Clare?" then said Percy, suddenly, in slow and very bewildered tones.

"Yes—I have cousin Marion, of course, and she is always so sweet and good—but Percy, I got accustomed to so many, somehow, and to so much life about me in those pleasant old days, that, yes—perhaps it is very wrong of me, but, I confess that I do feel often that it is very silent and that I am very lonely now."

"Lonely!" repeated Percy, wonderingly, and looking at the same time with furtive and anxious glances

towards the door. "But where is—where is—the fellow, you know—I mean, where is Carr?"

"Verner Carr!" said Clare, and she started slightly, her cheek grew a shade paler, and a curious, proud, cold light gleamed for an instant in her eyes; then she said gently to him. "You do not know, Percy, then, that that is all at an end?"

"At an end!" He sprang up and came a step towards her, but then he sat down in his seat again.

He must control himself, he remembered—there was to be no unseemly exhibition of his own feelings to-day. He must think of her, and of his duty. No sort of outburst to be permitted upon his own account, so—"At an end!" was all he repeated again, after an instant's pause, as if it was an astonishing but not a very affecting fact.

"Yes," she continued. "Do not talk about it. It is simply something over and done. Major Carr has gone abroad, I believe." And she strove to steady her voice and to talk quietly as if it was all very natural and nothing in any way particular to her.

"God speed him!" said Percy, devoutly, and Clare smiled a little sadly but very brightly, too, at him, in

spite of herself, as he brought out this very characteristic and expressive remark.

Then, as they talked there, Miss Erskine came in, very pleased to see Percy again. And she greeted him with cordiality, and sat down with them, and together the three talked pleasantly for an hour.

And then, Percy got himself away, somehow, and found himself down in the dark street again with his heart bounding and glowing with joy and new life within him, and with a maze of delightful but half-realized possibilities all entangled in his delirious brain.

What an hour he had passed! What a visit! What a sweet, bright, Heaven-lit time! Paradise had opened wide her gates once again for him, and fair before his young, ardent eyes spread the hopes and the passionate joy of life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Her old Friends.

Of course Percy went straight to Everett, and burst in upon him, rampant with boisterous joy and spirit, and noisy as a summer tempest in his new-found delight. And Everett received him with satisfaction only second to his own.

"My dear fellow, have you been dead and buried for this month and more?" he said as he clasped Percy's hand and made him welcome by the studio fire.

"No, no," said he, noisily. "Not a bit dead and buried. I am as right as a trivet, and as jolly as a sand-boy, Everett. How are you?"

"I—I am all right, but what has come to *you*, Percy, I should like to know?"

"I am sure I do not know what has come to me," laughed the other, with a bright, happy ring in his voice, "only I am awfully glad to see you, Hardy, old fellow, and it is all very nice and satisfactory, you know."

"What the devil are you talking about?" said

Everett, laconically, settling himself for a snug pipe, and eyeing Percy with no little amazement in his keen gaze.

As far as Everett knew, there was little cause for all this hilarity; for working away quite quietly in his own studio at his big new picture, through the short winter light, he had heard nothing for the last month of any news that might be stirring in the outer world. He had had a "hard working fit" upon him, that had come either spontaneously or by a strong effort of his will. And there he had been, in the snug studio, ever since Percy had left him, painting away undisturbed by any one, and burying all the bitter thoughts of friends who had gone, and friends who had disappointed him, in that lethe of consolation, his bewitching art. So whatever Percy had to communicate was all fresh, new intelligence to him.

"I have been to see her," Percy went on, when he had lit the cigar with which Hardy provided him, and had sat down to soothe his hot excitement with its fragrant narcotic fumes. "I have been to see her, and, by Jove, Everett, she quite got the better of me. I very nearly made an utter ass of myself, when she came in looking so quiet, and so sad, in her black

dress, prettier and more bewitching than ever, but with something mournful about her, somehow, that brought a great choking lump into my throat. Oh, she looked an angel, Everett, and lovelier than ever—though her eyes were all heavy with tears."

" 'The rose is fairest when 'tis washed in dew,
And love is sweetest when 'tis bathed in tears,' "

quoth Everett. "Well, Bligh, I am glad you have been to see her, and I am glad it has done you good."

"Good! I should think it has. I do not care, Hardy, if she never looks at me; even if she will never have anything to say to me again. But I am down-right glad and rejoiced and delighted that she has broken with that fellow Carr."

"Broken with Carr!" exclaimed Hardy, eagerly. "Halloa, Percy, that is news indeed."

"Had not you heard it? Well, and I had not, till she told me her own sweet self."

"Told you herself! Well, then, there is no mistaking it; it is very good tidings, Percy, and I am right glad it is true."

"True as gospel," the other answered. "She said it distinctly—it is all quite at an end. She gave me no reason, she told me nothing, of course, the dear,

loyal-hearted little heroine she is. But I could see it well enough,—the cad!—the sneaking, selfish cad! Of course he was just the one to desert a girl when he found she was not going to have a sou."

"What in Heaven's name are you going on about, Percy?" exclaimed Everett, with extreme impatience, almost anger in his tone. "I do not understand a word you're saying, man. What on earth do you mean?"

"Do you not know?" said Percy; then sitting up and turning his eyes upon Everett he removed his glowing cigar from his lips, that he might the better express his surprise at Hardy's ignorance, and relate the story he had to tell.

"I know nothing, save that I think you are 'screwed,' my boy, and that it is a shame and disgrace to you at this hour of the day."

And then after a merry laugh at Hardy's impatience and mystification, Percy told him the whole entrancing tale. And Everett, as he listened, felt his cheek glow and his eyes suffuse with intense emotion, and broken expressions of pleasure and strong approval came again and again from his lips.

"What a brute I have been!" he murmured to

himself when it was over. "And I have never been near her this month and more."

CHAPTER XIX.

Summer Light on Winter Days.

CLARE ERSKINE'S tale is almost over.

After that visit from Percy, she had no more cause to complain of the desertion of her old friends. For Everett and Percy rallied at her side from that evening, with an eagerness of devotion that was most consoling to her. And Charlie Keith and Sir Edward Hartopp, and many another old companion of her days of sunshine, came again and again, after the news had reached them, to inquire for her and Miss Erskine, to proffer such assistance as they might be to her, and to express their concern and cordial feeling for her in every possible way.

Town was dull and empty still, for these were the dark days of early January now; before Parliament meets, and before people who love sport desert covers and hunting-box in the country; and during which people who hate rain and fogs take themselves off to the Continent in that hunt for sunshine which seems

never to tire. And London was dreary enough, for poor Clare especially, who, in all her vagarious history, had never seen it in its cloudy mantle, at that wintry season before.

And it would have been a sad business, indeed, for her and Marion, if these kind old friends had not come so often to cheer their solitude, and to brighten, with pleasant converse, the dark afternoons.

When matters were looked thoroughly into, and things were cleared up, it became evident and indisputable that the future looked very dusky for Clare. If she carried out her plans for the clearing of her father's name and memory from all shadow of reproach, she would impoverish herself beyond anything that had been expected or realized. And she did determine to carry out the plan. She remained firm and unchanging to her first resolution, notwithstanding the threatening aspect which her own future assumed.

"I am sure it is what uncle Lairdie would have expected of me," she said; "to say nothing of what I owe in affection to the memory of poor father himself."

It was in vain that even her own friends insinuated that there was something Quixotic beyond common

rule, in such a line of action as this. In vain some people hinted that the standard of honour, as it stood among the racing men and the tribes of Israel, to whom most of her father's debts were owing, did not reach so high as the point of view from which she regarded the state of matters, with the eyes of a Moray-Erskine of the Glen—she could not see it in any different light. She would not accept any modification or compromise of the matter at all; because, she was so young! so keenly and intensely sensitive, in her proud heart at all these points, when she felt the honour of her name had been assailed; and because she was so eagerly enthusiastic, so ready to fling lavishly into the gulf of her father's ruin all thought and consideration for herself.

She was of age, now, and it all belonged to her, and Marion could not find it in her heart to arrest her actions, to gainsay her wishes, or to endeavour to drag down her high ideal.

So it all went—the whole large sum of money that the lawyer raised for her, on the value of the Glen estates; it all went to appease the angry-faced phalanx of George's creditors, and to stem the fiery current of vituperation that had assailed his name.

They had no great capital in the family, independent of the value of the estate; and there was nothing else to fall back upon, when the income from the farms and shooting rents was gone; and—awaiting the sale of the property—this income was soon absorbed in interest for moneys raised to meet the immediate demands upon Old George's account.

Thus Clare found herself, before the winter was over, robbed and all despoiled of her plumage, her wealth, and her glory, as the brilliant young heiress of the Glen. There was little saved for her when all came to be summed up and paid.

The property did not find an immediate purchaser, however, and there was always the hope (so the lawyer told her,) that it might, after all, realize a few thousands over and beyond what had been raised and paid out for her father's credit, and so form a portion for her.

Meanwhile, things looked dark enough for her. There was nothing but Marion's little portion really secure,—with three hundred a year, which they kept back for Clare herself; insisting that *it* should be set aside and reserved for her, as if she were simply a daughter under the old entail, receiving her indepen-

dent portion, and not as she now was, the sole proprietress of the estate. To this arrangement, under Marion's advice, Clare consented, and with this slender income, with all the changed circumstances and altered prospects it implied, she found herself facing life again, when the new year turned.

Poor Clare! she had little idea what all these changes really implied for her. She had plenty of enthusiasm, plenty of will and heart for self-sacrifice to any extent or degree; but she had little practical knowledge of the facts of poverty. But her spirit and her courage were both high—and there was no flinching or visible sign of regret as she signed the papers, one by one, that gave all power and possession in the beloved Glen away from her, and as the little house in Curzon Street, her pretty victoria, and her favourite horses were all resigned. As for the yacht—the white-winged *Plaisir*—and the irreproachable drag, they had both been seized and appropriated long ago, before Clare had begun to think about the matter at all.

So all evidence of Old George and his brilliant set were swept away from Mayfair, from the sunny bay of Nice, from the Paris Boulevards, from Melton and

Cowes, and from other haunts of fun and fashion, where they had once been so well known.

And Marion and Clare, uncertain what their future course must be, went for the immediate present into a little apartment Everett found for them, in the house of a friend of his. Mademoiselle Fanlie, and even faithful John, were each disposed of, and Leplat had to tear himself from the service with many tears. Only Ewen remained of all the old set of family retainers, and he only because nothing could induce him to leave—he went with them from Curzon Street to the little Kensington house. With the turn of the new year Clare woke up, to find a new, curious life opening out before her, and new, strange duties coming across her path.

Marion Erskine was a woman to whom all this change came easily. Her heart ached often, to be sure, when she thought of the Glen, and her tears fell bitterly in solitary moments over the blighted history of her young darling's life; over the memory of that reckless, selfish, thoughtless career of him, who passed away so swiftly from before their eyes, and who had left such grave burdens behind him, to weight the conscience and grieve the high-strung spirit of the girl

who came up after him; and whose history (but for his legacy of dishonour,) would have been so rich and bright. But Marion could take the shocks of life and stand firm under them; and she had her darling through everything to herself, had her safe, too, from Verner Carr!

They went together, despoiling themselves of everything that had made life soft and fair and luxurious about them, and facing with steady composure the trying change.

It was all done, a completed event, and almost an accustomed condition of things by the time winter was over and the cold early spring coming on. 'Midst all these doings and changes, the first days of March arrived and found them in the little drawing-room in Kensington, a comparatively humble but pleasant abode, where Clare had established her small, new kingdom, and where she was learning, with Marion's help and encouragement, to understand really what it meant "to be poor." In many ways it was less terrible to her than may be imagined; for, first of all, she found that it did not mean necessarily the loss of friends—not such friends, at least, as at any time of her life she had appreciated.

Among these, of course, Lord and Lady Arnleigh came early, for they had hurried up to town, indeed, to see and comfort Clare, when the news had first reached them of the two old men's deaths. But then they had gone down to their winter home again when Marion had come south to Curzon Street, and though many warm letters passed constantly between Marion and her best-beloved friend, they did not meet again until Parliament had assembled, and they came before Easter for the session to town.

Then they had hastened to New Street, and found these two in their altered circumstances—in their little home. And they had lavished upon them every solicitous expression of earnest sympathy and deep concern, which the warm feelings of an almost life-long affection prompted with true sincerity indeed. And they had offered to do anything that both friendship and generous impulse could possibly do, to alleviate the rough realities of the position, or to modify the difficulties of the case.

But what could they do? There is, practically, so little in which sincerest friendship can help practical trouble with independence of feeling upon either side. What could they do, but express their sorrow and

affectionate sympathy, with half-regretful approval of what Clare had done?

Then among other and many kind friends who were warm and true to them, came, first on the list, Percy Bligh, who all this time was happier than he had been for many a weary day. That deep, faithful, loving heart of his was far less hungry, far less lonely and disconsolate than it had been for long.

He was sorry for Clare; so full of sympathy and so invariably touched to the very spring of his keenest feelings, when he saw her with these altered surroundings in that poor little room of hers, that he had to bolt away invariably time after time, his parting sentence unfinished—half he had come to tell her left unsaid. For he always got that "beastly lump in his throat again," as he expressed it to Hardy. He began to feel "like a fool," and his retreat was always precipitate, because he had to get away as he best could, and as fast as possible, when the moment came that he could not say another word. But still he went again. And, oh! that going was sweet. That gloomy, foggy winter was brighter than ever sunlit, golden summers had been to him. For there she was, and she did not refuse to see him; and, oh!—dearest sen-

sation to a true and devoted heart—she *needed* him. He came with comfort and strength to her always, and his coming was a constant and quiet pleasure, deep and increasing, though unrealized.

She had loved Percy, indeed, with a warm, grateful feeling that *was* downright love, ever since the moment when he stood eager and enthusiastic before her (in the day of her disappointment and bitterness about Verner Carr), and had thanked her so spontaneously, warmly, and enthusiastically for her generous conduct towards the memory of "his old friend." There had been something in this way of taking it that had touched Clare's heart with a quickening and most enlightening effect. She felt full of gratitude to him for his concern, and a thousand times more grateful because, with her, he had thought for her father, and not, like every one else about her, for herself.

And as she had dwelt in the after days again and again upon his hearty words, and had recalled, along with their memory, the eager, honest expression of his flushed face and glowing, tender eyes, she had remembered, once more, too, that day by the gleaming river; and a twilight walk towards the grey old house;—a parting that had been then—and a greeting exchanged

at the same moment on the same twilight scene. And in the reminiscence there crept over her heart a gleam of vivid light upon two characters.

Again and again she sighed as she thought of that twilight scene, and realized that she had made some fatal mistake that evening between two very different men.

That was all over now, she thought, and swept away into an irretrievable past. She was poor now, and had no prospects—no Glen to give her favoured suitor, no fortune with which to enrich him, if he happened to be needy and poor. So all the old past must be gone for ever, and she must form a new state of things.

Still, she need not refuse to receive Percy, although that afternoon by the river had *been*, indeed, in that long ago; for he, too, knew, she thought, how changed was everything, and how differently she regarded her coming life. And he was such an old, dear friend—she could not refuse him any more than Everett Hardy or the Arnleighs, when he liked to come.

So, the winter had swept past them and this state of things went on; Lord Wynton's hunters standing idle the whole time, as far as Percy was concerned.

The season was an open one, and the runs were splendid all over the country, far and near, but he never stirred from town through all these months.

"For once in his life," as he ejaculated when Hardy chaffed him, "he had found something worth his while to think about—something to interest him beyond scurrying over the country after foxes, or killing animals of some kind, which, from January to December, was all he had hitherto ever found to do."

CHAPTER XX.

Tried again.

THINGS were all much in this state when, one day, Percy came to New Street. It was near the end of March. Marion had gone out that afternoon, and he found Clare alone in her little drawing-room. He had come eagerly in, with his hands full of spring flowers, which he had bought for her, and with such a gleam of bright happiness upon his fair, grave face.

And Clare had taken the flowers from him with exclamations of gratitude and frank delight, and stood arranging them all in a vase of old Worcester china,

one of the treasures which they had sent her from the Glen.

And he stood and watched her. The girl was changed. Years of life had swept over her in the few months that had come lately upon her, so full of swiftly following events. She was worn a little, and quieter and much graver in expression than she had been a year ago, and the stain of many tears, moreover, lay in deep, dark rings beneath her eyes. The long months in town, also, had told upon her, and the loss of all the old, bright, changeful life. Her black dress, too, made her figure look fragile, and, in many ways, she was altered strikingly from the "Éclair" of old. It was this realization coming over him continually, as he saw her, that "bowled him over always," as Percy expressed it, again and again.

"Poor, blessed darling!" as he would say to Hardy. "If I could only help her! The grind is telling, Everett; it is a rough bit of water that she is pulling through. By George! if I could only take the burden from off her, and strap it on these broad, useless shoulders of mine!"

He thought this every time he saw her, and he

thought it again with strong, wistful longing, as he stood silent and looked at her now.

"What lovely flowers you have brought me, Percy!" she said, suddenly, as he remained standing beside her, and watched her deft movements as she grouped his nosegay in her vase.

"The best I could get," he said; "but they are not much worth having, I am afraid."

"Oh, yes, they are, and I am grateful to you; for, do you know, of all the nice things we used to have in our wandering winters, there is nothing I miss so much as the flowers."

"Yes, by Jove! there is a difference! They were jolly days, Clare, were they not, when we used to anchor down at Villafranca, and at the little Africa, do you remember, just round out of Monaco Bay?"

"I should think I do. What a Paradise it was, to be sure, of sunshine and gladness and flowers!"

"Round the corner, yes, where the yacht used to lie, with you, Clare, but it was not all a Paradise, I can tell you, round the other side."

"At Monaco; no, no, how terrible it was, to be sure! I never would go to Monaco, you know, Percy. I always made father anchor round in the other bay."

"Yes, and it was jolly enough there, too, Clare, was it not? After we had dined on board in the evening, we used to row under the orange grove by moonlight, do you remember?"

"Oh, Percy! Percy! Yes, I remember it all. It comes back to me a thousand times, every scene, every face, even, that I used to see often in those bright old days. And my father, with his cheery smile, making life so sweet for me, strewing my way with rose leaves, Percy, as it seems now to me. He was too good; I think, he spoilt me, really, and made me unfit for rough, common life."

"I think you are unfit for rough, common life," he answered, in a hoarse, quivering voice. "It is just what I do think you are quite unfit for, Clare."

She laughed lightly at him, and bent her head on one side to see the graceful grouping of the flowers.

"Oh, no, Percy, I did not mean it in that way. I am quite fit, I hope, to face it bravely, whatever may be coming."

"You are not," he repeated, eagerly. "And why should you have to face it? why should you, of all

people, Clare, have rough, horrid things to bear? You, who——"

But he could get on no further.

"Why not?" she answered, quietly then. "It is very good of you, and very kind of you, to think of me, and be sorry for me at all. But why should I not have to face it? Why should I have had my life all sweetened with sunshine and rose-leaves for me, while other people have had difficult things to bear? Do you know, Percy," she went on, turning away from her flowers then, and seating herself on a low sofa by the fire; "do you know, I often think about it all, and realize that in the bright old days we lived, all of us, a very foolish and useless life!"

"It was a very jolly one," he answered coming round also to the fireplace, and sitting down slowly on a chair near where she sat.

"Yes, it was a very cloudless, delightful, bewitching life; but oh, Percy! Percy! when sad times come, and we stand still and look back upon it;—it does seem to me, as if we all of us, poor father and Charlie Keith and every one besides, you and I, were living in a very idle and wasteful way. What were we doing,

Percy, any one of us, except enjoing ourselves? What were we doing for the good of any one else?"

"Not much, I am afraid," he said, gravely, looking down at the carpet and reddening as the demure little moralist went on.

"I am sure it was wrong. I am sure I deserved correction, for I, at all events, had learnt other things from Marion and uncle Lairdie, long, long ago—and yet I was worse than any of you, Percy. I was just spoilt and indulged, and cared for, all the sunny days from year to year. None of us did anything except Everett, did we, Percy? Oh, I am sure it was very foolish and wrong!"

"I am sure I do not know," said Percy, disconsolately; "for the question is always, you know, 'What *is* a fellow to do?'"

"Oh, I am sure there are lots of things, Percy. I am sure you, who are so strong and good—I am sure there must be quantities of useful things that you might do. But I cannot tell you, for I have been so foolish myself, too, that now I seem to know nothing at all, and cannot see yet, anything that I can do."

"I know what I wish you would do!" said Percy, suddenly.

"Oh, there is nothing," she answered, dreamily, for her thoughts were absorbed in grave reflections, and she had not caught the purport of his eager words —"there is nothing I can do now but just wait and be patient, and then I am sure some way of life for me will be opened by-and-by; and, do you know, Percy, it's so strange, but I do not much regret the old life, either. When one has had great, big losses like I have, in losing father and uncle Lairdie, and other troubles—common little losses like all the difficult things about money do not seem the least to affect one, and I seem to regret nothing in the life of the past now, except always, always the dear old Glen."

"Do you seem to regret *it* much, Clare?" the young fellow said then, watching her furtively with eager, wistful gaze.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed, and she turned suddenly upon him, her eyes all suffused with quick feeling and with a painful and touching echo in her passionate tones. "Oh, yes, I long and long for it! I cannot help it, Percy. I try to forget it again and again, but it comes back and back to me more vividly and more regretfully every day. And father and

uncle Lairdie—they, too—they often come. It rushes back to me, Percy, in a way," she continued, lowering her voice, "that I would not tell any one but you—at night, you know, when I feel as if I should never sleep, and in the evening before the light, when I am sitting with cousin Marion at the fire—it comes back to me—the Glen, and the river rushing between the rocks below the house, and the glorious, foaming falls, and the woods, and the brown bracken slopes in autumn, and the red-stemmed pine trees, just when the sun is set. Oh, Percy! it comes in such vivid pictures, and I long for it with such a weary pain! It is a terrible thing to say good-bye to the old home of all our family and of one's sweet, early days. I sometimes feel as if I must call it all back again, before it has gone quite away. Oh, why did I tell you all this?" she exclaimed. "You will not tell anybody, will you? You will not repeat it again?"

"It is not very likely that I should," he said, assuringly. "Look here, Clare, I never thought that you felt it all in this kind of way."

"It is not the 'change,' as people call it," she said. "It is not being poor, or having no carriage, Percy, or anything that every one pities me for, that I really

feel. It is the dear old place itself—it is the Glen. It is the whole beloved country that I long for; with its fresh winds blowing over the moorlands, and the deep river rushing gloriously between the wooded banks —those are the kind of things I long for! One breath of the heather air, one sight of the gleam upon the loch when the sun sets, one evening by the wild, foaming falls! Oh, Percy! I am very foolish; but all my heart's in the Highlands, I fear."

"But why should not you go there, one of these days?" he answered. "Let us all go, and make a journey, Clare, when the summer comes, just in a jolly lot, as we used to be—you and Miss Erskine and Everett Hardy and I. Let us go up to the Highlands, and bring back some of the nice old times!"

She shook her head.

"I do not know, Percy, if it will ever be. You know we cannot do things just as we would like to do them now."

"Yes, you can," he exclaimed, "if you will only do it. Oh, Clare, won't you listen to *me* once more—once more?"

"Percy," she began; but he did not let her go on. He began vehemently again—

"I must speak to you, just as I did that day last year by the river—I must tell it to you all over again. I love you, Clare, worse than ever. Yes, worse, ten thousand times, than I did last year. I have had the most miserable time without you all these months that any fellow ever can have lived through, and now, I do not want to bother you badly about all that. But won't you think of it? I might help you a bit, you know, with some things just now and then."

"Percy, you are so very good to me, my dear old friend!"

"It is good to myself I want to be. Look here, Clare—now, won't you think of it? I have got awfully little to offer you. I have made ducks and drakes of nearly all I had; but I've three hundred a year, I dare say, left when all's settled, you know; and that is just what you have got yourself. Oh, Clare, do think of it! I am sure we could be quite happy on that."

"I am sure we could, Percy," she said quietly, and then she turned away from him to hide her running tears.

"Well, will you, then, Clare?"

"No, no," she cried; "I cannot, I cannot, Percy! Do not make me say it to you again!" she urged.

"No? Ah, then, God help me! But why 'no?' Cannot you like me, Clare? Let us talk quietly about it—just openly, as if from friend to friend. Cannot you like me, just a little bit? indeed, I would be quite satisfied with that."

"I do like you, Percy," she cried through her tears —"I do like you; but, oh! I cannot say 'yes' to that! I cannot—I cannot, indeed! Oh, Percy! it is very good of you to want me still; but I cannot do it! I cannot put myself and all my poverty and my difficulties on to your shoulders, although they are so kind and strong. But it is very good of you—now I have not the Glen nor anything as I used to have—it is very good of you to want me still."

"Want you? By Jove!" he exclaimed. "What has the Glen to do with it? I have wanted you, God bless you, Clare! ever since I set eyes upon you at Cowes that year when you first came a cruise with us in the yacht; and I will want till my dying day, I know. If you had not a farthing, and I had got only a crust of bread, I would offer you the best half of it, Clare, if I starved for another piece to-morrow."

"Yes, I am sure you would, Percy," she answered —and though she still turned from him, she held to

him a grateful hand. He took it, and held it kindly in a light, firm clasp.

"We are too old friends to mince matters, you know, Clare. We may as well speak out to each other frankly on both sides. We are as poor as church rats —just the two of us, and there is nothing coming, in any direction that I know of, for me; but we would do very well, Clare. A man need not keep hunters all his life long, eating their heads off at Melton, and I know I could do perfectly without the club. So you think of it, then, Clare, now won't you, dear? Turn it over, well over, in your mind."

"No, no," she exclaimed again. "Percy! Percy! I cannot. Do not press me to it, for my heart is all in the Highlands," she said. "I do not seem to have any wish or craving for anything else. Thank you so much—thank you; you are so generous and good and kind, but I cannot do it. I cannot give you my poor, tired, sad self. So think of some one else, dear friend —there are numbers of people younger, and, surely, far brighter than I."

"I will have no one at all," he answered, gloomily; "that's all I have to say, Clare. If you will have nothing to do with me—I am sure it is no wonder—but

I, as far as I go, at all events—I will have nobody else."

So, once more, she refused him, and sent him off disconsolate and sad.

But he was not in despair altogether — for she had been kind, so very kind to him. And the "No," although decided, had been very tenderly said.

And Percy had an idea that it was a case for patience. She did not hate him at heart—that was evident now. So long, he thought, as he did not tease her with persistent proposing, he was sure that she would let him come and go. So it was a case for patience and for falling upon some skilful stratagem, for he saw clearly now the big obstacle that was in his way!

She could not take him, however much he might urge her, and however wistfully she might seem to be inclined to yield, because she had refused him once when she was a rich and brilliant heiress. She would not accept him now, when she had nothing to bestow. It was a case to be circumvented by stratagem, and so Percy set his brain actively to work.

That this was a somewhat correct surmise on the

part of Percy, was evident from the frame of mind in which Miss Erskine discovered her little cousin about an hour after he was gone. Clare was curled deep in her arm-chair, and she was weeping; with strong, passionate sobs coming up from her heart's depth, but not with an utterly disconsolate or despairing mien.

"He is such a good fellow!" she added, when she told all to Marion. "And oh, yes—I do like him so very, very much. But, Marion, I can never, never take him now, you see, after refusing him, long ago, at the Glen!"

This was a dead-lock in the solution of their life's problem, and it was difficult to see how it might be overcome.

Percy's was not a "faint heart," however, and he was quite determined sooner or later to win.

CHAPTER XXI.

Wistful and Weary.

"My heart's in the Highlands," Clare had said to Percy, and it was very true. The events of life which had hurried upon her during the last few months had combined in a curious effect upon her heart and mind. They seemed to have swept over her, and to have effaced almost from her memory, or at least from her affection and interest, much of the gay, glittering portions of her history, which had been lived out in bright social scenes.

Events seemed to have come so thick and suddenly, that they had condensed themselves in a misty cloud which hung over the times that immediately preceded them, and left only softly revealed to her meditative view the far-away horizon of her old home life, and the fair, simple memories of what her girlish days had been.

So, when she lay awake at night, as she said to Percy, it was the old Glen in its wild beauty that came floating before her sleepless eyes; and when she sat tired and silent, musing in the twilight with

Marion, by their little fireside, it was again to the dear old house that her thoughts went wandering backwards; and in her longing to be there again, and in her sorrow for the two dear lost ones, who had been the centre of her existence in its beloved scenes, she forgot to long for other and gayer phases of life, that had fled also from her, and she forgot, moreover, to sorrow for any one else.

In the midst of all these earnest and real difficulties of life, which she had been called to face lately, she had come to look upon the wandering days, and the fair, bright things they had brought to her, as a frothing and evaporating state of being; and in these last months of her strong efforts and trials, she had grown to regard *him* (who had been the pleasant playfellow of her gay holiday years, and who had failed her as strength, support, and comfort when real life arrived,) as simply a part, a central figure, perhaps, but still only an incidental part, of all that thoughtless existence, containing in himself the same element of unreality and evaporation which had been the nature of the whole.

As such he had been swept from her mind when all the rest went, and was regretted about as much

and as little as the rest. She had no time for such regrets, she felt, in these days, and no room in her life to miss the yacht, the sunshine, the house in Curzon Street, or Verner Carr; so full was her heart of missing and sorrowing for her father and for uncle Lairdie; so full of longing for the dear old house, and for the Glen; and so full, too, was every corner that was left vacant, with present people and things. Such feelings as could be spared from that sad retrospect were all centred now in gratitude to those who had stood steady and true to her through the days of angry storms and shipwreck, and who still offered the devotion and faithful kindness of their whole lives.

Such was Everett, and such, above and before all, was Percy Bligh. She had been cruel to *him* in her bright days of prosperity, and he had been true to her through all. The vivid contrast of his character to that other one came out so strong and fair before her, that it changed, as if with strong sudden convulsion, the whole condition of her heart. She could not love a creature such as Verner had been. She could not pretend, even when her own conscience whispered that she had been swift and sudden in her alteration, and

that the feelings she once had for Verner had not stood well the test of disappointment in him. They had not stood it, and she would not pretend they had. She had thought him one description of man, and she had found him another. She had loved the being she thought him; she could never stoop to love such a one as he was. She loved what was true and noble and faithful, through sunshine and tempest, through winter and summer, through poverty and plenty alike; and such a one was he who now laid his heart once more at her feet again, and she mourned sincerely that she had put him from her in those days gone by.

She could not take him now, she thought. She could not burden and impoverish him. She could not accept the generous offer at his hands, however warmly he made it. She could not consent to let him give up all the little pleasures of his life for her.

"He thinks he could do without his hunters, poor fellow, and that he will give everything he has got to be spent on me. And so he would, but I cannot let him do it. So he would, I know, but I cannot weight him with myself."

This was the one bit of persistent pride remaining in her young vigorous heart, to remind Clare Erskine

that she had once been in that proud position of the heiress, who had so much to bestow when she gave herself, and whose capture had been a mark for the ambition of many classes of men. Now it was too late, she thought, Percy must not be allowed to spoil the pleasures of his own life.

CHAPTER XXII.

"A Cropper."

THEY went on thus, and Percy became finally very restless and quite unhappy over it, although still persistent. They were both so poor now, there was no denying it, and she shook her head always when he tried to get near the subject once again. He began to fear it would be impossible to remove this last scruple from her mind.

"If she would only believe," he said over and over again to Everett, "how sick I am of hunters and of the whole business, you know. How much happier I should be if she would let me just *do* for her, as an occupation, and look after her affairs. But she won't, and I do not see where a lift is to come from. She

will never get over that confounded day, Hardy, when she refused me at the Glen."

So it was going on, when June came round; hot, stuffy, and oppressive in London, and in the tiny rooms where Marion and Clare's destiny now appointed them to live. And Clare drooped, as the summer sped on, and the change and restriction of her life seemed to be wearing her, quite unconsciously to herself, but yet inevitably.

The social and sporting year went round, and events occurred with their usual inevitable sequence, the great W—— racing day making its appearance at last, "just," as Percy said, "in the same monotonous routine as it had done all his life." And he went down there because Wynton had asked him to go, and because that merry little viscount had a horse running, of whose success he was most sanguine and whose exploits he was anxious Percy should see.

They went down together—Percy in a state of rather gloomy and inflammable excitement; in that dangerous condition of restless dissatisfaction, in which a man never knows what he may do. And perhaps there was more champagne consumed upon the drag-top at luncheon than was good for him, or perhaps

the general tenor of his mind and the complication just then in his heart's history, made him reckless and culpably regardless of the possible consequence of what he did.

It is impossible to say, but certain it is, that in the course of the day, while excitement grew hotter and the bets ran higher and higher every hour, Percy backed Wynton's horse with foolish scorn of possibility, again and again.

Thus, when the great race was run, and Nemophlia came in simply 'nowhere,' he woke to realize that he had bet and lost so heavily, that the whole of his already much-impaired and impoverished fortune would not meet the case; that that six thousand pounds at five per cent., which he had been offering Clare so patiently for the whole spring and summer, was his no longer, and could be offered no more.

Poor Percy! it was a cold awakening for him as Nemophila came walking quietly up to the winning-post. It was like a pitcher of icy water dashed upon the face of a dreaming man, as the realization came upon him. Here was a pretty climax of all the general smash he had made of his bungled life! Here was the end of it all now, at all events. He might as

well give up the business, and turn his back upon those cherished hopes, and on the dearest wishes of his heart.

What had he now to offer her? It was a nice finish, this, to his romance! He went off that racing ground a despairing man. He found Wynton first and shook him by the hand.

"Good-bye, old boy," he said. "Better luck to you next time; that mare has played us all a nasty trick."

"By Jove, she has!" said little Wynton, with a gay light-hearted smile. "I hope you did not put much on her, Percy? I never was more deceived."

"Yes; I put a small sum," said Percy, tranquilly. "And it is gone the way of the blessed, after all the rest that went ahead of it before. So good-bye, old chap; I am going to make a run of it to-night. I am going over to the other side."

"What! you ain't tree'd, Percy?"

"Pretty near," said the other. "I have made a nice mess of it; so for the present I am just going away. I have got enough to meet it all, Wynton, so it doesn't much matter, I dare say; and I'll write back to old Swiggs, the lawyer, to settle it all. Good-bye."

"By Jove! Percy, I am awfully sorry!" said the little viscount; "and it was with backing my Nemophila, too. By Jove! I am very sorry, I am. Look here, Percy, I would put you all straight in a minute. I would give you a cheque now, right off, but I have dropped such a horrid lot myself, I have. But look here, it will be all right; do not go and bother your old head. I will square it up for you again, after a few days. I am going to ride in the V—— Race to-morrow, you know, and I am safe as anything to win that. And then, when I have once got that business over, and my head clear and straight again, we will send for old Swiggs, you know, to Wynton, and you shall come down, and we will have a day at the accounts. Will you? That is all right. Good-bye, old chap; don't forget to turn up."

"Sydney, you are a regular little trump!" said Percy, and he shook his brother's hand. "Good-bye!"

Then Percy struggled across the heath, took the train to London, and went off to his rooms, and then to the Victoria Station, without delay. He was in a desperate state of mind just then. He felt he could not see any of them. He must get away, and think about it all by himself. For he was "done for," he knew.

Wynton was a capital good fellow, but his promises were more ready than his purse. He had large expenses of his own afloat, and could not stand a sudden tug upon him. He had the racing stud, and his yacht, and his hunters, and several big places to be kept up; and he made ducks and drakes most successfully, in many ways, of his twenty thousand a year. So, though Percy could always feel him a sure draw for a fifty-pound note, if he happened to want one, or for a month of hunting, or a year's lodging indeed, at Wynton or Broadlands, or anywhere else the viscount happened to be, still Percy knew he *was* practically "done for;" his brother would never really pay up this debt.

So away he went to the seaside to pour his plaint and his despair over his own most unparalleled folly to the sad waves. He reached Dover, and late as the hour was he betook himself to the pier. He walked out to its extreme point, and there, with the fresh salt breezes blowing upon his hot brows, he sat down and tried to gather his thoughts within him, and to realize clearly the exact position he now stood in, and the line of action it behoved him to adopt.

There he sat through hours and hours of the June

night, as he had done on the steam-boat deck, nearly a year ago, as he came back with Hardy from their Norwegian tour.

There he sat, and thought, and struggled with his bitter self-reproach. And his intense love for *her* whom he had loved so long—and of whom all hope for ever was gone from him now—came surging up into his mind with the memory of his past history, and the realization of what its character had been.

"How right she is!" he thought. "What a life I have lived of it! What a log on the face of the earth I have been, to be sure! What a stupid and idiotic existence it is that we fellows lead! And we come to the edge at last—and look over, and there is nothing but chaos and bewilderment and vast emptiness before us, as we gaze down the pit of darkness in which we have thrown our lives. Oh, I wish some one could have shown me years ago how I might have made something better of it! I wish I had not been such an utter ass! But now it is all up! I must write and tell her. I must take back the offer of my paltry income, which is lying all this time for her acceptance at her feet; and I must tell her that I have nothing,

nothing, nothing to offer her, and that I am going forth a vagabond upon the world."

And away the young fellow's eyes travelled, out over the wide horizon of the sea; and as his life, stage by stage, floated fast before him, he hated and despised it in every phase, until the thought swept with a mighty wave of despair over his heart, and he bent his head down in abject and hopeless wretchedness, and covered his tired, gloomy countenance with his hands.

There he thought and thought on until, as time passed, other feelings began to assert their power. Innate courage, the indomitable patience, and eager enthusiasm of his deep heart, all began to stir again within him and to resist the stunning burden of his great despair. Strong, vigorous resolutions came, one by one, rearing their heads like the rugged faces of rocky promontories above the surging ocean of his despair; and another vision began to paint itself in glowing and ever-brightening hues upon his mind—a clear vision of another future, won by steady effort, by vigorous struggles, by unswerving resolve.

He was young still, the thought came; he was strong, and full of health and spirit, and all the force

of determination that was wanted for an earnest life. And he *would* live—yes, he told himself—live as she would have him live, feel as she would have him feel, about all the duty and the work and the sternness of life, and so, in a far away, golden future, she might yet be his.

Yes, he would wait and work to win her, until all her determination melted away before his patient faithfulness; and till she could refuse him no longer, because he had struggled and won. So out of Percy's life, as he walked down that pier again, the darkness and despair rolled gradually away.

As he rose from his bed in the morning, after a few hours of hastily snatched sleep, the oppressive sense of hopeless trouble and bewilderment seemed also to have left him; and, more than this, with that heaving wave in which they flowed back there seemed to go from him, along with these, all the memory and all the caring for his old *insouciant* life. His heart was beating high with new resolutions, and his far-away future was taking to itself fair colourings and glowing in a soft, seductive light, as he came down upon the harbour in the morning, and realized that the early boat was just then starting for the other side.

By the narrow gangway, leading down into the steamer from the pier's edge, Percy caught sight suddenly of a man he knew, and at the same moment the fact became clear to him that his own pocket was almost empty of money. So he approached his friend, and was greeted instantly with condolence.

"I am very sorry," his friend said, "to hear such bad news of you, Bligh. I had a letter from Tom Ellersley only last night, and he said that Nemophila had quite smashed you up."

"Pretty nearly," said Percy, gravely. "So much so, old fellow, that I am going to ask you to lend me a few sovereigns until I can write back to old Swiggs, my lawyer, and to Wynton to get some cash. I came away hurriedly from town yesterday, and forgot all about it."

"My dear boy, I am most awfully sorry," said the other, "but—I am dreadfully out of pocket myself just now, and I assure you I have not a sovereign to spare."

Percy eyed him curiously for a moment. He was one of those sort of individuals who hang about the world in odd corners, and especially upon the Dover and Calais pier. He had been often enough hard up

himself in his time, there was no doubt, and many a fiver Percy had brought out for him to meet a pressing need. Now—well, he *had* a good many loose sovereigns in his pocket at that moment; but Tom Ellersley's letter had been very decided in its tone, and Percy was evidently a "done" man.

Percy looked at him, then took from his waistcoat pocket a handful of silver. "It is all right," he said, cheerily. "It does not matter. This will keep me going for a little bit, and take me across, and then I will telegraph to Wynton. Good-bye, Crieff. I am sorry to hear that you are so hard up." In another minute he was on board the Calais packet.

They got under way and were breasting the waves out beyond the pier before Crieff had made up his mind whether he had been an ass or not. He thought conclusively that upon the whole he had.

"For there is no knowing," he said to himself, a little anxiously, as he walked up the pier and went home to breakfast; "there is no knowing with those sort of fellows, like Bligh, with relations; they may have a windfall before you can look about you any day."

CHAPTER XXIII.

By the Sad Sea Wave.

PERCY liked the sea. He had always liked it, and had his whole life long had a way of coming to it when anything went very wrong. So he paced the deck as the little steamer plunged over the rough crossing and let the sea winds blow fresh upon his face with their strong reviving power. And his heart grew stronger within him with every wave they topped, and courage and resolution and bright hopes came; reminding him again and again that he was young and full of spirit, and that it behoved a man of character and courage to hold on against all.

There were other worlds, he thought, as his eye scanned the wide ocean view, other worlds, where men like him, of strong and eager heart, could work their way back to fortune and win new lives and even fresh honours for themselves; and he could go out there, he thought, to one of those far-away lands of industry and fertility and hope.

He would get Sydney to set him agoing, and to ship him off; and then he would tell *her* that

he would worry her no more now with his presence or with his continued, if silent, pleading for himself. But, that, if she would only wait and give him one golden bit of hope and promise to carry away with him, he would come back some day, and lay a fortune at her feet for her acceptance, when he claimed her again.

Meanwhile he would go on to Calais and would write back to her and Wynton from there. For he always liked to get away like this, when anything happened to him. He could not go back straight to London, and hear everybody discussing and condoling with him on what he had done. So at Calais he landed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Summons.

It was a dull, warm June day. The sun was covered with a hot, sultry sort of mist, and the old town looked weird and picturesque as he strolled up the pier. He could not tell exactly why he had come here; but here he was, with the long day on his hands

to dispose of, and plenty of time and quiet before him in which to think.

And he did think, on and on, upon all his new schemes and projects, as he wandered upon the rampart all that day, and up and down the quaint old streets; as he sat alone in the hotel dining-room, and as he gathered his ideas together to write to Wynton and Clare.

He wrote his letters in the afternoon and then he left them unposted; and for some more reflections he went out once more. He walked back to the pier, on to the beach, by the wharf and fishing town, and back again towards his hotel until it was quite evening; and until the thought occurred to him that he had better go back and post his letters and dine.

He felt he had lived through a strange time since he had left the racecourse, only the evening before—the sort of time that adds ages to a man's life in a few short hours—the sort of time of which the memory remains always, through everything, stamping its influence on the thoughts and the views and actions which ever afterwards characterize the life.

He was an altered man, he knew, and for ever, as

once more he approached the entrance to the large hotel.

At the door, as he drew near the hotel, a man was standing; an official-looking individual, in a railway livery, holding a large and very suggestive-looking envelope in his hand. It was a telegram, and in consort and counsel with the head waiter, he was anxiously scanning the address.

"English," they were saying to each other. "No doubt English, but who? Hold, yes—the Monsieur who came here to-day, and truly this is he. See, Monsieur, is not this message for you?"

The man held out the envelope and there certainly was his name:—"P. Bligh, Calais. Try all the hotels."

"I have been to four," the man said energetically. "But *grâce à Dieu*, that I have found you here."

Percy took the telegram mechanically. He put his hand in his pocket and held out to the porter one of his few remaining francs. Mechanically, he walked up the hotel door-steps, and turned into the smoking-room.

It seemed all very strange. For some minutes

his eyes remained fixed upon the envelope — and he racked his brain with bewildering questions, as to who should have sent after him here? It was only to Charlie Keith that he had mentioned that he was *en route* for Calais last night.

At length he opened it, and, sure enough, it was from Charlie. But the message in no way concerned Charlie himself. It was dated from V——; it had been sent off at four o'clock that day, and it said—

"Come at once. Wynton rode the Cruiser to-day, and has had a nasty fall. Doctor, hopeful; but do not delay."

The words were blurred before Percy's eyes in an instant; a great mist seemed to gather between him and the thin telegram paper, as he held it in his hand. A whirling noise seemed to fill his brain, and he stood stunned an instant, as he repeated again the last sentence.

"'Hopeful!' hopeful of what? Hah! Sydney? why, he has had a cropper many and many a time before. But, poor old boy!—of course, I will go to him. I suppose he wanted me, as Charlie telegraphed right off. But, Sydney, he is a game little fellow; he don't mind a spill of any kind. Is it a collar-bone or the

other leg this time, I wonder? It was the right shin-bone when I was at Nice, last year. But I will go to him all right. I will telegraph. No, by Jove! I won't though, for I must run, I have only just time to catch the boat."

And he did run—getting on board just as the rope was slipped, and as the paddles began slowly to go round. And he sat down in the captain's cabin, for half the way, and much disgusted and astonished many suffering *voyageurs* by consuming an excellent rough repast of salt beef and anchovies, with which the steward provided him, as they tossed over the frothing sea.

It was late in the evening when they touched the Dover side once more; but there again, as usual, on the pier, was Crieff.

"Halloa, Bligh," he said, as Percy sprang ashore, "here is a go for you, old fellow; are you bundling up to town?"

"Yes; I have had a telegram from Keith, from V——. Have you heard anything? Seems my plucky little brother has had a spill to-day. By jingo! the fellow must be made of gutta-percha, he never seems to care which side he comes down. But I am going

up to see him, as Keith thought proper to send me the 'gram."

Crieff was looking in his face with astonishment as he spoke.

"You take it coolly, by Jove! Bligh," he said. "But you always were a cool fish at the best of times."

"Bless your heart, my dear fellow," said Percy, "if Wynton chooses to make a shuttlecock of his little body, can I help it? It is his taste, not mine. I always do pick him up, but, by Jove! he is such a plucky little beggar, he is generally up and 'a-going' again, before I can get so far. I have seen him break every bone in his body consecutively already."

"He has not broken any bone this time, at all events, it's clear," said Crieff, in a peculiar tone.

"Has not he? So much the better. But what has he been doing, then? Keith would not 'gram to me for a mere toss or a bruise. Eh? What have you heard, Crieff? Is the little chap much the worse?"

"Well, Danby, of the 4th, saw it all, you know, and he was here for an hour, and has gone over by the steamer that crossed yours."

"Well?"

"Well, he seemed to say that Wynton has had a nasty squeeze, but they could not tell where, when he came away."

"By Jove! Is it serious? I am sure I hope not. Poor little Sydney! there is not a better fellow about. But, halloa! I must look alive, Crieff; if I am to catch this train for London, I must be off. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, old boy," said the other. Then he called suddenly after Percy, as he hurried up the pier. Something had occurred to Crieff — a blunder that might still be put to rights. "I say, Bligh, if you want anything, you know. I mean, look here, could I lend you a ten-pound note?"

Percy stopped and looked at him. For an instant, he had even forgotten the train. He did not want the money, for he had found some loose notes and coin about his carelessly guarded receptacles, which he was not aware he possessed; but the offer took his breath suddenly away. He looked at Crieff; the colour rushed over his forehead and then faded away again, and without a single word in answer, he turned rapidly and sped up the causeway to the train.

"By George!" he muttered, as he ran along. "It must be very bad with poor Wynton, after all!"

CHAPTER XXV.

Fair Fortune.

THE fair, soft breaking of the next June morning found Percy sitting alone in the garden of the Guards' barracks at V——, after another long, wakeful, and broken night—found him sitting there much as he had been sitting yesterday at this hour by the shimmering sea on the Dover pier,—found him with eyes swollen and weary with excitement and sorrow,—found him trying to clear and cool his brain once more, to face another new page in his changeful life. He had been only just in time. Upon the low couch where they had laid him, in one of the barrack rooms of the regiment, he had found his brother lying pale, unconscious, exhausted with the last feeble struggle for life. He had rallied to recognize Percy; he had smiled upon him with wistful kindliness, and a fading light had glimmered for an instant in the small blue eyes that had twinkled so cheerily only a few hours ago; and then it was all over, and Wynton had played his little part in the busy, teeming throng of men that crowd and jostle each other on the stage of life. His part

was over, his place was vacant, and Percy would enter upon it in his stead.

For a long time Percy did not remember how it affected him at all, save that he had lost his only brother; that he was gone, the bright, little, kindly fellow, who had stood by him and pulled him through, with careless but unfailing generosity, again and again.

And he could think of nothing for long, but of that merry voice that was hushed for ever, and that agile, little, plucky figure that would spring into his saddle, or ride to cover, or wear the gay Wynton colours at flat race or steeplechase no more.

Poor little Sydney! They had been capital friends since they had been left, two orphans, to breast the world together, while they were still at Eton, and struggling out of the fourth form. Poor little Wynton! and it was all up with him now.

Then gradually the recollection broke over Percy of the vast and wonderful difference in everything it made for him. He had not taken in all the fellows had said, who had crowded in the ante-room while Sydney had lain dying all through the night. They had only reached his ears, and not got near his un-

derstanding, all these half-uttered remarks with which men had grasped his hand as he passed through them, when all was over, on his way to rush out into the cool morning air. But it came gradually to him, the realization of what had passed to him now, as the head and the possessor of the family name.

"Poor Wynton!" he muttered, again and again. "Poor Sydney! I am sure I wish he could have lived and kept it all!"

Then another thought came to him, and he sprang up and paced the gravel for a few steps, and then returned to sit down again; and as he raised his eyes, the morning broke forth across the far soft line of the horizon, in delicate streaks of bright silver and grey, and the thoughts of the morning before returned to him; and of all he had been resolving and realizing and projecting then; and he remembered the far country to which he had meant to travel, the new life he was about to live, and the prize, the distant reward of faith and constancy, he had meant to claim from one whom he had loved so long. And all suddenly a bitter cry of regret broke only half restrained from Percy's lips.

"Oh, God!" he exclaimed, "now what is to be-

come of me? I am really done for, for ever and ever now. She will never take me; she will never look at me, now poor Sydney has gone off, when she would not say 'Yes' to me before. She never will, I am quite sure of it. I am done for altogether now."

And with a groan of renewed despair and consternation, he stood up and stamped furiously upon the ground. Then again he thought about it. There was no way of escaping from the facts.

Poor Sydney lay dead there! He could never come back to claim his own again, and he (Percy Bligh), who had been so happy only one day ago, planning his new life and his new enterprise far away in some colonial wilds, was the tenth Viscount Wynton, and must stay at home to spend his many thousands a year.

"By George! it is too bad!" he groaned to himself. "And I never felt so sure of her in all my life as I did twelve hours ago. I know her—I know her true heart, God bless her! and if I had gone to her with that story yesterday she would have taken me—yes, right away! and I should have gone off as happy as a king, and carried her promise along with me, and have come back to claim her with a jolly fortune in no time

at all. And now—and now she will never have anything more to say to me, and I declare it is too bad—too bad!"

And away he went again into a labyrinth of meditation, turning up and down in his mind every conceivable suggestion of what he could possibly do.

Finally, some clear idea must have occurred to him —he went off suddenly and gravely into the house. He saw his poor brother's servant and one or two of the friends who had taken everything in charge. He told them he must go to London, but that he would return at night, and they undertook for him all the requisite duties, so he felt free to go. He started.

It was nine o'clock then; he had been refreshed and had breakfasted, and the train carried him to London in less than an hour. He drove straight to New Street, and he sent up a request that young Miss Erskine would see him for a few minutes. Then upstairs he walked, eagerly, but quite calmly, full of his deep design, and as he entered the drawing-room he was conscious simply of the hope, that *one* event closely regarding him had been too late for the morning papers to-day!

CHAPTER XXVI.

Rusé.

Evidently it had been too late, or Clare had not looked at the newspaper, for though she showed some slight surprise at seeing him, she made no special remark.

She said, "Come in, Percy. You are a very early visitor to-day. Cousin Marion is busy. She writes all her letters of a morning, so you must be satisfied, if you come at this hour, to be entertained by me."

"I shall be quite satisfied," said Percy, smiling a little. "May I stay just a few minutes, and say something that I want to say to you, Clare?"

She coloured a little, and looked quickly at him. Had he come, at this early hour, to make another of his eager, passionate appeals to her? It seemed scarcely likely from his aspect. Somehow he looked different from usual—flushed, rather tired, and excited; but he did not look pleadingly up at her, as he had sometimes done, and she did not feel that another outbreak of his eager feelings was coming now.

"What is it, Percy?" she said, quickly. "Will you not sit down?"

He took a seat near her. She had placed herself in her usual favourite chair—a long, low one, without arms and with a sloping back, which she had kept and brought with her from Curzon Street. She took up a little bit of idle-looking work with which to occupy her fingers and engage her eyes while he talked to her, for he had sat down very near to her, and faced her fully, and was looking straight at her with his great, blue, eager eyes.

She glanced up at him with a quick, questioning expression, and something in his aspect then arrested her gaze. She let her work fall idly upon her lap, and continued looking at him with wonder and anxiety.

"My dear friend," she said presently, "what is the matter with you?"

Percy had had two almost sleepless nights. He had crossed over to France and come back again with scarcely any halt upon the way; he had lived through hours of intense excitement since she had last seen him, and he had sustained a great shock to his feelings and his nerves. And it had all altered him since

Clare had last received him there, in her little drawing-room, the evening before the W—— Races, three days ago. There were dark, deep lines round his eyes; there was a feverish look upon his flushed face, and a curious, restless quiver upon his lips, as he began to speak to her eagerly—hastily, as if afraid he should not have time for all he had to say.

"What is the matter with you, Percy?" she had exclaimed.

"There is a good deal the matter with me," he answered.

"Good gracious, Percy! do tell me, quick. Do not look at me like that. Do not look so miserable and dreadful. What *is* the matter? What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Doing a good deal with myself altogether, since I last saw you," he said.

"Oh, tell me! Do not keep me in suspense. What is the matter? Tell me this instant. Tell me quick."

"I have come to say good-bye to you. That is what's the matter, Clare," he said at last, in a low and breaking tone.

"Percy, what do you mean?"

"I mean I have been coming a cropper since I saw you last Tuesday. I have had a regular smash since then, Clare."

"But how? Oh, Percy, please do not go on like that; tell me everything—straight out, without more ado. What *is* the matter? What *have* you been doing? Come to say good-bye to me? What do you mean?"

"Well, I will tell you, then. Look here, Clare, you know the W—— Races were on Tuesday last?"

"Yes, I know; that is to say, I remember poor father—and—all of you used to go down about this time. But, oh, Percy! What has that to do with you? Surely, surely, you have not been betting there?"

"Well, you know I have pretty well given up that sort of thing. I never bet in these days, not once in a twelvemonth, Clare. But something came over me that day. Poor Sydney had a horse entered, Nemophila; it was such a pretty mare. The poor boy was awfully fond of her, and I was with him there, you see, and I always went a little way to back Sydney's horse. And he was so enthusiastic about the race, and worked us all up to think that Nemophila was a

sure thing, and so I backed him and backed him, Clare, until I had, between one fellow and another at least six thousand pounds upon the mare."

"Oh, Percy, Percy! how could you?"

"I did, and little Sydney, poor little beggar, was awfully big about it, and as pleased with us all and with himself as could be. And I do not regret it, by Jove! I do not regret it," exclaimed Percy solemnly, almost forgetting his projected view of argument, and breaking out into revelations he had meant to keep to himself. "I do not regret it for a moment, Clare, that I was there that day with Sydney, and that I backed him like a man."

"Oh, Percy, Percy! how foolish of you!"

"No, it was not — not for Sydney's sake, poor fellow! You know—but, by Jove! I am forgetting. Where was I, eh? Yes, for myself, it was a real unlucky hit. Nemophila came in nowhere, Clare, and I have lost every penny of my last six thousand pounds."

"Oh, Percy!" There seemed nothing more for Clare to say, but she said it each time with a deeper commiseration and reproach. "How could you Percy?"

"I do not know, but I did it," he said, "and now it is gone. I am awfully sorry, Clare—you know it was the six thousand pounds I wanted to settle on you, all that I had to offer, you know, and now it is all gone—smashed and done for. So, well, I have come to wish you good-bye."

"Oh, but why, Percy? why? Must you rush from all your friends because you have been foolish and unlucky about money affairs? Why 'good-bye,' Percy? I do not see what use that can be to you at all events."

"Yes, good-bye, I am off, Clare. I sat and thought about it half the night through, after it had all happened, down at Dover by the sea, and it seemed to come strongly over me, the resolution that I must get away."

"Really away, Percy? Do you mean a long way off?"

"I mean to t'other side the world," he answered; "where I can make a new beginning, and try and make something better of my life. Look here, Clare. Nay, don't you fret about it," for Clare turned her head suddenly away. "I do not like breaking up the old ties at all, and we have been friends a long time

together, especially you and Everett and I. But I have been thinking as hard as I can over it all, over what you have been saying to me lately about the waste and folly of our lives, and, do you know, I think you are in the right, almost. I begin to see it just as you do. A man has not strength, and head, and arms, and hands given in this world just to expend all upon killing something from January to December, killing everything he can get hold of, including time. That is the way I begin to look at it now, Clare, and I am going to melt up all my past habits of life together, and to throw them into a fresh mould now."

"Oh, Percy!" was still all Clare could say.

"Well, yes, that is about it. Then, you see, Clare, there is nothing of that kind to be done in this country here. And I would only get into more mischief. I never have anybody with me at the right moment, you know, to keep me straight, and nobody has ever cared enough to take the tidying-up of my life into their hands; so there it is, I am done for now, on every side, and there is nothing for it but to efface myself out of my old world, and get thoroughly away. But I could not go without saying good-bye to you, Clare, or telling you what had been the end of it all. So

good-bye, dear, once more. I must call you 'dear,' my own, the only love of all my stupid, blundering life—good-bye! I will think often of you over there, you know—I will never forget you, I will never care for any woman besides you. And, who knows, some day I may come back, please God, and find you happy in some new bright home. I trust sincerely I may, Clare," he added, earnestly. "May you get some one better and more worthy your taking, before long, than me. So good-bye, dear, once more, good-bye to you. I shall be faithful in my heart for ever; but see, I resign all hope or claim upon you with my hand." And he held out his hand to her, rising at the same moment, as if to say "good-bye."

"Oh, Percy! do not go," said Clare, rising also, and facing him with quivering eyelid and downcast eyes.

"I must go!" he exclaimed. "There's no room for me at home; and why should I not go? I am sure no one will care much beyond the gentle regret of an old friend, just here and there. Such a friend as you are, perhaps, Clare, will regret me for a moment, and then forget me altogether, till I appear again. But I thank you for your regrets, dear, you have been a kind, good

friend to me. I must go, I must really, indeed. I had much better go, for I am sure for one thing, at all events, that there is no one who really wants to keep me here."

"Yes, yes, Percy, there is!" then Clare cried suddenly to him, turning her soft eyes upon his face, and laying her hand with an impulsive, eager gesture upon his. "Yes, yes; for *I* want you, Percy! Oh, I have wanted you so very much for such a long, long time."

"Wanted me, Clare?"

"Yes, yes," she hurried on; "even since that afternoon by the river at the Glen, Percy, when you broke away from me, and never, for such months and months, came back; when you broke away out of my bright girl-life, which had seemed so full of sunshine and so rich in everything and in every one I wished for or loved; since you went away then, and never came back to me again till all that old life seemed gone from me, and until I met you in quite another world. I have always wanted you every day of the year, Percy, every step of my way. That autumn —yes, even that very autumn—I seemed all the while to be missing and wanting some one—only, Percy, it was not for a long while afterwards that I knew really

that I had been wanting you. Oh, do not go now, I cannot do without you, I cannot, indeed."

"Clare!" His eyes suffused and gleamed with eager, wistful tenderness upon her. Did he understand it rightly? Had his *ruse*, then, so well succeeded? Was it coming at last, the sweet light into his life, without which all else that fortune had brought so suddenly to him, would have no real value in his eyes? Was it come? "Clare, Clare!" he exclaimed wistfully, as he drew nearer to her, and held her hand in an eager clasp.

"Yes, dear," she went on, simply again. "I cannot do without you, and that is the beginning and end of what I have got to say." And she smiled up at him, a tremulous, sad, sweet light breaking out from among the blinding tears that filled her eyes. "Oh, Percy! you must not go," she went on, "for I have always got my three hundred a year, and, oh! we shall do very well on that. Poverty is surely the very last thing in this life of ours that matters much. I know we shall do very well, for I do not care the least for buying things; and you never cared one bit what you had for dinner —not at any time. And so, if you have no money left, will not you take half of mine, at least; and if you want some one to watch over you, and be a little

help to you in keeping right and straight in the future —do you, oh! do you think that I could be of any use? Because, if so, I do want you to stay so very much—so I hope, I *hope*, Percy, you will not go. I am sure, dear, on three hundred pounds we might do very well."

"My darling, my dear sweet love!" he broke out eagerly then, in breaking passionate accents of uncontrollable joy. "Of course we will do very well, you dear, blessed, little angel that you are; of course we shall do splendidly. Look at my arms, Clare, feel my fist and muscles, do not you think I should be able to do something towards keeping the pot boiling, too, with these? I will work for you, you blessed darling, until there won't be a thing you can wish for that gold can buy for you, that I shall not pour out at your feet. Oh, my own love, thank you a thousand times! I thank you for your sweet, faithful heart, Clare, and for these precious words."

"I cannot help it, Percy, perhaps it is very wrong of me, but, indeed, I cannot let you go."

"Go, indeed; that I won't,—not a bit of me. I won't go."

"I am sure," she continued, "we shall do very

nicely, just on three hundred a year; and we will change all our old ways, dear, and learn not to be selfish and frivolous, but to live for others, Percy, and not always for ourselves. And you will help me, dear. Yes, indeed, for *I* am very wrong and selfish—I cannot stop my longing for the dear old Glen."

"No, by Jove!" he answered characteristically to himself, as something struck him he had not thought of before. "Is your heart still all in the Highlands, Clare?" he went on tenderly, and a little curious smile curled for a moment on his lips.

She looked up at him again then. A quiver shook her lips, and a soft, eager light trembled for a moment in her eyes. Very gently he drew her near to him, and slowly his arm crept round her waist; and his eyes, full of earnest, faithful devotion, answered the wistful plaintive tenderness in hers. Her head drooped forward and she rested quietly and in deep silence for a moment in his gentle, strong embrace. Then she answered his last question, the words stealing like music softly upwards to his bending ear.

"No; I love the old Glen intensely," she said. "I often long to be there, I often pine and crave to see it and to tread the moors and scramble over the hill

paths again. But I think that is all past now, and that it will never more come back so painfully again. For though I love the old Glen, very, very much, Percy, still I think *now*—my heart is here!"

At that moment cousin Marion came in, opening the door suddenly, and entering rapidly, with a widely extended newspaper in her hand. But she stopped short on the threshold, and a rush of colour swept over her cheek and a glad, bright smile danced in her kind, sweet eyes. For she had broken in, without warning, on a most unexpected scene. Clare turned, and instantly approached her, drawing herself away from Percy, but still letting him retain his firm clasp of her left hand.

"Cousin Marion," Clare whispered. "Come in, and come and speak to him. He wants to go off to the other end of the world somewhere, Marion, but I have been telling him he is not to go."

"And I am not going," exclaimed Percy, determinedly, and blushing a furious crimson as he glanced at the newspaper Miss Erskine held in her hand, and then scanned the astonished expression of her face.

"Percy has lost all his money," Clare went on. "He has been a foolish, wicked boy, but we cannot

let him go for all that, cousin Marion, can we? We could never do without him, neither you nor I."

"Lost his money!" Miss Erskine repeated, and then she turned to Percy, a curious confusion of mingled expressions combating each other upon her face.

"Do not tell her," he said, plaintively. "Do not tell her yet."

"My dear Mr. Bligh,—I mean,—not Mr. Bligh, but,—am I to congratulate you or condole with you?"

"Miss Erskine, congratulate me," exclaimed Percy warmly. "For everything else may go to smash as it likes—only I am very sorry for poor little Sydney, indeed—I am just as sorry as I can be. I cannot help everything else, you know, and I had forgotten all about it——. But yes, certainly, do congratulate me, for I never felt so happy in my life."

"What are you two talking about?" said Clare. "Cousin Marion, what have you in that newspaper? What are you looking so mystified about? Are you not glad, dear? Kiss me, Marion, and tell me you are really glad. I know you are, you need not pretend to look so grave over it. It is what you have been wanting, you dear old humbug, all along."

"I am very glad," said Marion, and she bent to kiss Clare tenderly, at the same time extending to Percy her right hand. "I should have been just as glad, too, believe me," she continued, turning warmly towards him, "if it had not been Lord Wynton, but just my very dear old friend, so constant, so ardent, so faithful, my old friend, Percy Bligh. This is a sad event, Lord Wynton, but as I never knew your brother, I can afford to be very joyful in every possible respect for you."

"Percy, Percy, what does cousin Marion mean?" cried Clare to him then, and he turned with a deep flush upon his cheek to her again.

Cousin Marion somehow slipped out of the room, carrying away her tears of tender gladness to shed them quietly and comfortably upstairs by herself. For she saw there was something odd about the details of the *dénouement*, and if there had been misunderstanding about it anywhere, she thought the two much better left to scramble out of it by themselves.

And somehow they did manage it. An hour afterwards they were still sitting in earnest and happy conclave, on Clare's little sofa together. And she had heard all the story, and given her softly whispered for-

giveness for the *ruse* he had practised in carrying the citadel of her heart. And he had eagerly assured her that it would be quite as pleasant, although equally difficult, to reform their lives and work out their scheme of earnestness and utility, in the position to which fate really called them, as it would have been on three hundred a year.

"We shall live at Wynton, you know," he had eagerly explained to her. "And there will be lots of things there for you to do. Poor Sydney did not care about it, so I am sure things have gone to rack and ruin enough; you will put it all to rights for me, Clare, just as you would have patched up my life and got it as right as a trivet, if we had really started upon next to nothing at all. You would have done it in any case, for me, and now, it will be all the same really, only you will not mind it being in a different kind of way?"

"Oh, you good, faithful dear!" said Clare, earnestly to him, smiling up with infinite tenderness into his fair, honest face, and laying her small white hand once more upon his broad palm; "I will do anything, anything, all my life long in the world, that I *can* do for you, to show how utterly your faithful tenderness—

has won my love. And oh, it is all very sweet and delightful, dear! and I am sure God has been very good to me, and I hope He will give me strength in the future to live well and earnestly my new beautiful life. Only," she added softly, "there is just one little thing, I will always love you—just by any name—but I cannot help being a little sorry that you are no longer 'my Percy Bligh.'"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Heart and Hand.

THERE were days of jubilee after that, in the merry old set, and Verner Carr, far away on the Italian lakes, philandering, idle and indolent, as usual, by Mrs. Paget's side, read an announcement, which caused him to swear deeply and furiously with jealousy and anger and general and most unmitigated disgust.

But no one thought much about him in these happy days. He was left to work out his own selfish life, and weave his own schemes, and bore himself, or amuse himself, as fate ordained for him, with his usual undivided care for his own interest and his own concerns. They had all other things to think of at home.

Before the heather was purple upon the Glen moors, the happy day was fixed for a very quiet and almost private marriage. Both were still in mourning, so no festivities or merry revels could be allowed.

But a few old friends gathered eagerly, full of warm interest and affection for both Percy and Clare;

and there was no lack of lovely presents to adorn, in an effective list, the report of the auspicious ceremony in the columns of the morning papers. But the richest and dearest present of all was not reported among the rest.

It came to Clare the last evening of her maiden life, after she had parted from Percy for the last time before they met at the altar together. And it came in the form of one of those short and expressive letters that had become so very dear to her, and that were so characteristic of himself.

"I have done it! My darling, I have done it! Hurrah! I was awfully afraid it would be too late. But I always meant to wed 'the Leddy o' the Glen,' Clare, and to have bonfires and eagles—and all the rest of it flourished up in the Highlands for me! So I have done it! The old Glen is ours, dearest—it is bought, paid for, and ours! I sold the Northumberland estate, the only unentailed part of the Wynton property, the day after you accepted me, and it has taken old Swiggs all this time squaring it up about the Glen. I asked Mr. Sandon not to mention it to you till it was well settled, and as you had the im-

prudence to give him 'power of attorney,' he has gone and sold it to *me!* The men say I should have given you a set of diamonds, Clare, and that I am as great a duffer as ever, because I forgot all about it, and have not given you a single present worth speaking about in all this time. So I send you one now, dear, the title-deeds of the old Glen in full. Your gift—'from Percy Dyncourt Wynton to his beloved spouse.' Eh—will that do? Of course, you know, it is all nonsense about the jewels, you may have as many diamonds as you like.

"Your own as ever,

"P. B."

* * * * *

Once again the bonfires glowed upon Craigianon heights, and all down the braesides of the Glen they flung the crimson reflection of their joyful and dancing lights, as young Lady Wynton drove along the road above the loch-side, and down the steep slope that led up to the old home.

She arrived there once more among them—"the bonnie daughter of the Moray-Erskines," the first heiress of the Glen, their "own bright-haired Leddy," returned to her inheritance, to all she had lost and

mourned so bitterly, restored to it by the unfailing faithfulness of her husband's love. And as the autumn light glowed deep on the purple moor and the bonfires flamed up as the carriage drew near the house; as she looked down upon the loch where the shadowy reflections lay soft and still; and as all the old memories and sweet associations of the beloved Glen rushed over Clare—her cheek crimsoned and her lip trembled with passionate gratitude to him whose devotion, so noble in expression, so unselfish in generosity, had brought all this intense sweetness into her young life.

She turned her gaze upon his fair, honest face, where he sat happy and sunny by her side; and as her eyes met his, suffused with joyful emotion, she whispered tenderly and low, "Oh, Percy, Percy! now I can say it truly, and you need not feel jealous: Now —all 'my heart's in the Highlands' indeed!"

THE END.

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My heart's in the Highlands

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